The Valley of Dreams
A Twisted Wonderland Fanzine

To you, who are content to dream...

Hello! Thank you so much for picking this zine up :) It is the labour of many, many people over many months who were moved by sheer love for fictional characters, to the point where we definitely went over 64 pages (once again) but also managed to create the most beautiful amalgamation of fanfiction and fanart about these four characters who are all family in one way or another.

Thank you to all the contributors who made this zine possible to the very end, the mass hoard of applicants who expressed their interest in getting this zine out of my Google Docs drafts, the mods for running this show in the funniest and most chaotic way possible, and **you, the reader**, as well, for looking us over and thinking about giving this a shot.

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To you, who are content to dream,

Welcome to the Valley of Dreams.

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In Loving Memory
of a Murderer

Ne'er Be Whole

Soru

CW: Angst, Grief, Hurt/No Comfort

"The grief that comes with loss is unique to the kind of loss. Truly, losing a friend can never be the same as losing a brother, a wife, or a child. Why are we, who are blessed to walk upright, so complicated from the time we breathe for the first time to the last?"

- An excerpt from an old human letter found at the ancient fort of Bladevale

It was ironic, Silver supposes, that both of his father's sons were content to live in the world of dreams. One could traverse dreams, and the other? The other, the older, the fae, could create dreams the likes of which had never been seen before (such was the extent of his power, his magic). It is, thus, also ironic, that the father they came to adore over the core of their lifetimes, has not yet awoken from his own slumber— and whether he is *truly content to dream* is debatable.

"Stop." A command from a distorted voice, and Silver elects to ignore it, body screaming for rest, for respite, and hands slick with sweat and the stains of blot that refuses to lie deep within his skin. "Stop now. Silver. Sebek." Malleus' voice is garbled, distorted, like he's losing himself in the blot of his own magic that he has honed over a century. Sebek stalls for a second, and that second is all that Malleus needs to regain his footing, and suddenly, despite all the housewardens (and Jamil) aiding them in this fight, it's like Malleus is 1700 men, and Lilia— father, father, father, father, *father*! — has still not woken up.

Malleus is a storm in his own right— a young man driven mad by the passage of time and inability to keep what has been his his whole life, grieving the loss of his father, driven further mad by the tears of a brother he has cherished— and no matter how hard Silver and Sebek try, backed up by the housewardens of the other dorms, Jamil, and the Professors, they cannot get through to him. Silver's body aches with the pain of his unique magic, and he fears that he falters *even once*, Malleus would be more than content to have them all dream again, and all the pain he has gone through will be for naught.

What should I do? Silver thinks as he parries another attack, shielding Sebek and Idia nearby. *Is there **anything** I can do?* But there is so little they can do right now— surviving this battle is a struggle enough. Silver falls behind Sebek, panting lightly as his junior and friend slightly smacks him in the chest. “Is there anything we can do, Silver?” he asks, the noise of the battle falling in the background.

In this moment, in this final battle, it is only the two of them and the night sky above.

“I’m not sure. Our armour can only do so much, even against Malleus.” Silver responds, and he feels the full force of a dull, throbbing ache in his arm. “All we can do is keep fighting, until Father wakes up.”

“Do you think he will?” Sebek asked, and Silver paused, suddenly afraid.

“I hope he does.”

Once upon a time, a little Fae prince and his brother decided to run away from home and explore the heart of the forest while their father was away. It was a decision taken within a second, large green eyes meeting soft, gentle, blue-purple ones, and with nothing, not even a rucksack of food, the duo vanished into the depths beyond the ancient trees.

“Are you sleepy, Silver?” Malleus asks the young boy sitting on his shoulders, though the lack of an answer makes it apparent— this cursed child has long since fallen asleep. “This won’t do, now. We’re almost there.” Malleus only chuckles at the quiet snoring above him, face snug between his horns, before he taps his brother’s thigh, waking him up. “Look, Silver.”

“Woah.” The young boy, still drowsy, looks beyond his brother’s horns to see a pond surrounded by flowering trees, the wind blowing the fallen flowers and stray leaves around him.

“Do you like it?” Malleus asks, gently picking up Silver to put him down. “This is the heart of the forest. Lilia said humans cannot come here unless they are older and know magic, but **I** am older and **know magic**, so we shall be okay.”

“Woah.”

“Is that all you shall be saying to me today, Silver?” Malleus chuckles, picking up the young boy, a forearm supporting his bottom like a chair. “Come on. Speak to me.”

“It’s so pretty, Malleus!” he screams. “**You’re** so pretty too. Like a flower.”

“Like a flower?”

“Mhm! Like **all** the flowers! Malleus is pretty!” *After all, children never lie.*

Hope is a fickle thing. Silver hopes for much in this moment, in this war— he hopes his father will wake up, he hopes his body stops aching. He hopes his brother will see reason before he loses everything to grief, and yet, hope is so fickle, that the moment it leaves the heart, everything goes wrong.

Everything went wrong in one second. And it was all his fault.

Malleus’s overblot had reached its peak, warping the sky above them and the ground below, and even the housewardens and Jamil, who had stayed back to help them in Lilia’s stead, were close to overblotting themselves once more. The school was drowning in the remnants of Malleus’ eternal dreamscape, still trapped in the drags of a wonderful dream and the eternity of a blot-fueled nightmare. They had fought to save him, pleaded, reached for him through the storm of his madness. And for a moment—a flicker, a breath—they had almost succeeded.

But then when Idia tossed his sword, Silver prayed for the angle to aim right at Malleus’ horn — the source of his magic, so he would yet be alive— but Malleus moved just by a fraction of an inch, so small it could barely be called a fraction—

And all everyone saw was blood as Malleus fell.

He catches Malleus as he falls, just as Malleus once caught him, long ago, when he was small, when he stumbled over his own feet and cried because the world was too vast, too unknown. “Little brother.” came a quiet whisper from the body, the bait of a final breath he did not mean to cause. Malleus’s voice is distant already, like he had long since crossed the threshold between the realms of the living and the dead, and Silver grits his teeth, kneeling to hug him. “Come. Let us go home.”

Home. Yes, let's go home.

"Let's go home, Silver." His voice is what the dying ember of a star probably sounds like, Silver thinks, and he feels Sebek fall next to him. Malleus' fingers are light against his cheek. They leave streaks of blood in their wake, smearing red over silver. "You were always my favorite little brother," Malleus whispers, and Silver wonders if it is the prince who speaks, or the dragon, or something else entirely.

"I'm your **only** little brother."

And then— stillness.

The battlefield is quiet. Silver wishes it were not.

The world did not rejoice in Malleus Draconia's death. The storms did not clear, and the land itself seemed to mourn the loss of the last Draconia.

A knight had slain his dragon, and now, there was nothing left.

"History repeats," Lilia murmured, voice distant. "No matter how much we fight it."

Silver would never be whole again.

HEAR NO
SEE NO
SPEAK NO EVIL

Diligent Care

It-Happened-One-Fic

Silver sighed softly as he looked at the ingredients arrayed across the countertop in front of him. All parts of the stew he had to make for Malleus, Sebek, and Lilia.

But the faerie flu was no laughing matter. It could put even strong fae, like Malleus himself, down and therefore was to be taken seriously.

Just like the normal flu, the faerie flu involved the entire laundry list of flu-like symptoms: fever, chills, muscle aches, congestion, coughing, fatigue, and a sore throat. However, beyond those symptoms, the disease could vary wildly from fae to fae and, if it wasn't properly handled, could range from a frustrating but relatively mild ailment all the way to potentially fatal. Especially for older fae.

It was true that the disease wasn't quite as bad for Sebek, since he was only half-fae and young at that, but even he was cooped up in bed. Snoring away to beat the band despite it being a weekday. And none of them needed to miss any more classes. Silver himself had requested the day off to take care of them.

It was true that he could've asked his classmates or dormmates for help, but there was Malleus to consider as well. The draconic fae always became more moody when he got this sick, and dragonfire was a very real risk with the way he'd been coughing the past few days.

And so Silver was left eyeing the stew ingredients all on his own and hoping he wouldn't fall asleep part of the way through taking care of his newfound patients.

All in all, the steps he had to take were relatively simple, though.

Make the stew without Lilia getting up and slipping extra-nutritious ingredients in, get all of them to eat a bowl of the stew, and then make sure each one took a single pill of medicine he'd already bought, no matter how nasty it might be.

“My, my, it looks like you’re making a certain kind of stew,” Silver looked up in time to see Lilia’s wide pink eyes narrowing in amusement from where he stood in the doorway. A blanket draped over his shoulder like it was a regal cape as he sniffled slightly.

Silver felt himself frown slightly at the sight of the shorter man as he stepped around the countertop, his tone immediately scolding, “Father, you should be resting.”

Lilia flapped a hand, as if waving away Silver’s concern as he walked into the kitchen with his makeshift cape clutched around his shoulders, “Nonsense, I’m perfectly—”

He cut off sharply in a coughing fit that had Silver frowning sympathetically, before he shook his head as Lilia trailed off.

“I suppose you may be right after all,” Lilia gave a rueful smile, shaking his head slightly before he continued, “I’ll go and check on Malleus, but then I’ll be right back to bed like a good little patient.”

He’d barely finished before Silver was shaking his head in disagreement. Lilia’s eyebrows arched slightly as the pale-haired young man crossed his arms, “No, I can handle everything. You should go and get some rest.”

Lilia let out a chuckle before nodding, surrendering with a surprising degree of ease that perfectly evidenced just how poorly he was feeling, “Alright then, I’ll leave it all up to my reliable son. Just be sure to call if you need help.”

He left with only a slight sniffle after floating over and ruffling Silver’s hair fondly. Though it wasn’t long before Silver could hear the rough coughs echoing out from behind the short fae. Silver turned back to the ingredients, resolved in his plan even despite his concerns.

Making the stew wouldn’t be all that difficult, though, and so long as he used the pressure cooker like he’d learned during the Culinary Crucible, falling asleep wouldn’t be as major of an issue.

And, just as Silver had solemnly predicted, he ended up finding himself waking up with bleary eyes as the timer’s buzzer rang out insistently to let him know the stew was done.

He could only hope it hadn't been going off for very long, though the respectable amount of liquid in the pot and lack of complaining about the racket from the buzzer was promising.

He felt himself smile slightly, thankful yet again for the Culinary Crucible's lessons as he started filling bowls and getting trays ready with water, a bowl of soup, and one pill each. And it wasn't even excessively late for supper.

All that remained now was to deliver each tray to the two sick fae and sick half-fae, respectively.

Silver started with Sebek, who had the largest bowl to match his incredible appetite that hardly seemed to have waned despite his cold.

He nudged the door open nonchalantly as he called out, "Sebek?"

Silver felt himself pause, his eyebrows arching in slight surprise at the sight that greeted him. But it was quite a sight to see the usually put-together freshmen sprawled out in bed like a whirlwind had attacked the sheets. Though his snoring wasn't really anything new.

Silver wasted very little time in shaking his sparring partner awake, though, before calmly instructing him to eat all his stew and take his medicine. But in reality, Silver wasn't actually that concerned about Sebek doing what he needed to.

All told, Sebek was probably the easiest patient of the trio, considering he was highly likely to just sleep off the sickness with only minimal assistance.

Rather, Silver's next patient, Malleus, was more apt to be the problematic one.

The draconic fae's eyes lit up the moment Silver stepped into the room, tray in hand, and a faint smile began to cross Malleus's face, "Silver, you made ste—"

Malleus's words cut off sharply as his eyes narrowed at the sight of the innocent-looking pill on the tray that Silver now sat in front of him. He crossed his arms, looking uniquely superior as his eyes flicked up to meet Silver's, "I'm not taking that." Gone was the happiness in his tone, and Silver was hardly surprised. So far as he knew, Malleus had always hated taking his medicine.

“You must if you want to recover,” Silver’s placid words were an echo of what he’d heard Lilia tell both Malleus and himself numerous times in the past. True to both form and Silver’s memory, Malleus’s expression somehow managed to sour even further, “It’s vile.”

Silver shook his head, mildly sympathetic but still wholly unmoved, “It’s necessary.”

Malleus’s frown deepened, becoming more and more petulant until Silver let out a sigh, “I’ll come back later for the tray, but if you haven’t taken the medicine by then, I’ll have to stay with you until you do.”

Malleus turned away, frowning out the window with an almost impressive level of sulkiness, “You sound like Lilia…. How are the others?”

Silver shifted, blinking tiredness out of his eyes as best as he could, “Reasonably well.” Sebek has already taken his medicine, but I still need to deliver Father’s.” Silver didn’t miss the side-eye Malleus gave him at the mention of Sebek taking his medicine like a responsible patient, but then Malleus waved his hand. Soundly dismissing Silver in a perfectly pouty manner, “Then go and take care of Lilia. I am fine here.”

Silver felt his eyebrows arch slightly, and he barely hesitated before pressing onwards. Usually, it never fell to him to scold Malleus about taking his medicine, but this wasn’t the usual situation, and even if it might be slightly disrespectful, Silver would rather receive a punishment than see Malleus’s cold get worse.

“And you’ll take your medicine while I’m gone,” Despite the phrasing, Silver wasn’t asking, and his words seemed to hang in the air as Malleus tensed before slowly twisting to look at him. His bright eyes narrowing till they were just a sliver of that almost acidic shade of green.

Silver crossed his arms, though, holding Malleus’s stare before the draconic fae let out a huff. Apparently deciding he’d tested the young man enough as he twisted away with a perfectly sullen expression, “You need not worry about my health. I will do what I must. Now go.”

There was a sharpness to his tone as he finished, with the words almost being snapped out. But a relieved sigh slipped out of Silver as he realized that, for once, he’d won this bout.

If Malleus had dug his heels in, there would've been nothing for it. Especially since Silver had seen the literal storms the prince could raise when forced to take such medicine.

A part of him was still wary about trusting Malleus to take the pill without dispatching it via magic or some other covert means, but he decided to trust him just like he always had with everything else.

After all, Silver still had one last patient to see. The middle-ground one. Less petulant than Malleus, but more apt to get up and wander around than Sebek.

Lilia greeted Silver with a smile as he walked in, patting the edge of the bed indicatively, "You finished with Malleus quickly enough… The stew smells wonderful."

A smile flickered across Silver's face as he sat down, placing the tray in front of his father and dutifully reciting the instructions yet again, "Make sure to eat all of it and take your medicine with a glass of water afterwards."

Lilia nodded, amusement sparkling in his eyes, "Yes, yes, I'll be a good little patient, and your diligent care will pay off, so you go ahead and rest now."

Silver frowned, shaking his head slightly, "Fath—"

"There's no use in exhausting yourself. You may be immune to the faerie flu, but no good can come of compromising your own health just to take care of all of us. Though, if you do, I'll just nurse you back to health just like always." Lilia interrupted easily, his tone softening from scolding to something more fond as he continued until Silver nodded, a small smile of his own flickering across his face, "Thank you, Father."

Lilia smiled, nodding his head easily, "And thank you, my wonderful little son."

Cheshanoneko

You've Shown Me How to See

GuestReader

Silver can taste the iron in his mouth as he struggles to keep himself upright. He could feel something wet slowly dribble down his face.

By his side were his comrades, those who gathered together for the final battle that Idia projected would be the final match, the one that Silver prophesied would be the most grueling of all they have faced.

He knew that challenging an overblotted Malleus would've been no easy task; it was the most difficult challenge of his life.

"I see that once again you've strived to keep standing," said Malleus, the blot-coated nails coming up to rest on his chin, as he regarded Silver with bright green eyes.

The taller man gazed at the wounds the younger sustained, and continued, "I applaud you. As a member of my guard, you have succeeded in every expectation. You may have faltered, but you managed to find your footing, on that, I give you my highest praise."

But the praise wasn't from Lord Malleus. The Lord Malleus that Silver knew and so desperately wished to save.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Silver spoke, "You… Lord Malleus, I know you don't want to hurt others. I know you think this is the way… But reality doesn't work this way."

The blot warbled, his tail slightly flicking, the neon green glow from his eye shimmering brightly, "This is the most optimal solution. Happiness for everyone in dreams, why, time won't even touch any of you."

“It may not touch us, but it’s touching the earth. The land. The animals. Sunlight hasn’t breached the island in days. We have not eaten true food, and neither have you for that matter,” Silver argued, “I implore you, let us treat you to a party in sunlight. Just let me help you,” he begged.

Silver felt so close to that same day, that very day they fell asleep under Malleus’ spell.

He cried and bared his emotional distress to Malleus, his lord, his very first guardian, his older brother. And Malleus had so desperately wished to heal him from that pain.

Why was he so different now? Malleus’ smile was so foreign.

“They are upset because of what wool you have lifted from their eyes. Their unhappiness is your fault. But, I don’t mind this little game. It’s been fun, Silver. Tag with Lilia, Hide and Seek with you and Sebek… I haven’t had such fun in ages,” Malleus hummed, “But now the fun is over. It is time to return to sleep.”

Silver gripped the sword in his hands.

Silver wanted to honor both of his fathers wish’ of creating that very understanding between them. He needed to fight. Fight, to make Malleus understand. Fight, for the peace on the other side of this conflict.

“Haaa… haaa… Dear me! Quite the move that you played there!” His father’s winded voice sounded. Lilia was still wearing his general outfit, although his hair had changed to how it was now, shorter with his usual magenta highlights.

His father was helping Sebek to stand straighter, his dream armor scuffed and parts burned. Sebek gripped the magearm weapon, its green glow giving off a faint glow as its owner attempted to call upon another spell.

“Sebek! Father! Are you both alright?”

“Hmph! As though I need you to worry?” Sebek responded, giving Silver his smug smirk, “If I were to be befallen like this, I wouldn’t be able to call myself his retainer!”

“Khee heh heh, that’s some spunk I like to see,” Lilia chuckled, before turning to face Malleus, who kept his smile on as he took in the appearance of the two, “You see, I believe this little tantrum turned playtime has run its course, Malleus. You’re already going to have to deal with a scolding from Malleficia; she never holds back, but I can soften the blow for you by making sure you end this of your own volition.”

The green fire that lit Malleus’ eye blazed brightly, and then the horned fae once again gave a laugh, chilling as it was.

Malleus’ laugh bubbled as he spoke, “Hehe.. Hahaha… You’re incredibly reassuring, aren’t you, Lilia? And aren’t you sweet? To coddle me after all these times despite spurning my presence at your side.”

At Lilia’s changed expression of confusion, Malleus tilted his head, “Wasn’t it inappropriate for me to be seen with you? I never understood why you so hated coming to the castle… But now that I do know… Perhaps I should destroy them?”

The three knew exactly who ‘them’ was. Those living in the castle of the capital. The Senate. And possibly his own…

“Malleus,” Lilia began, voice turning from his usual tone to something more serious, “You don’t mean that.”

“Oh. I don’t? I think I do, actually… No, in fact, I don’t think so. I know. I was so terribly tainted after all… They don’t consider me their prince. That’s alright. I don’t need to be theirs. I don’t need doddering old fools who consistently mock the one person who actually tried for me.”

As he spoke, thunder boomed, crashing heavily down that caused their other friends to wince, cry out, or curse at the loud noise.

“... Malleus, that is dangerous thinking and you need to stop that,” Lilia warned, looking at him intensely, “You are a good boy aren’t you, hm? I know you don’t want to hurt anybody–”

Malleus interrupted again, “But they would rather I be dead.”

Sebek balked, “Never- Never Lord Malleus no one would have rathered you dead!”

The forked dragon tail flicked in agitation, and Malleus' smile changed to a scowl, "Recall my hatching. A normal reaction that they should've had was jubilation. Relief. The prince they were waiting for finally hatched."

The two boys quickly inhaled as they did remember. It felt like so long ago now with how many dreams they've been into. Their lords hatching…

"My hatching turned out to be a scandal that they were wholly embarrassed by. The very idea that Lilia, who they view as a traitor, could love me, and cherish me, when grandmother had nary the time… oh, it made them livid that I had become tainted."

He hummed again, looking directly at Lilia, "Am I wrong? That they'd rather I died in my shell, never to have seen the light of day, than be awakened by you and your magic and love?"

Lilia sharply inhaled, fist tightening, "I was never once embarrassed of you. And I certainly never only loved you because you were your parents' child. I don't know exactly everything you saw, but I couldn't help but wonder how you would react to how the world was around you. Why, you almost singed my hair and I was so happy that I cried. I know you saw that."

Sebek and Silver stayed silent, desperately silently hoping that Lilia could break through the blot's grip on their lord.

If he was of a better mindset, then perhaps…

Perhaps they didn't need to fight. They could talk him down now, as he was.

Silver couldn't bear them to end up like how their parents did; fighting for their children, only to die and never meet them. He couldn't bear the idea of his little, precious family breaking apart so horribly like this.

"So I did," Malleus agreed, "And I saw how I was taken from you while you were helpless to do anything. And how you ended up being my mentor to come see me, and I to see you. Yes, even those modest and orchestrated meetups were despised, were they not?"

Seeing Lilia's grimace, Malleus hummed, "Never fear; I don't blame you. I do not harbor anger toward you, I understand why now. I'll simply do away with the old fools when I send all of you back to your dreams."

Silver felt cold sweat. Malleus wasn't listening. Or rather, he was listening. He just simply didn't want to see reason.

Darkness began to gather. A wave of magic flooded and Silver felt his heart skip a beat.

"Lord Malleus, please stop-!" Sebek screamed.

"Malleus, this won't solve anything-!" Lilia begged.

Silver was already exhausted, but he readied his blade, despite the slight tremble. Fighting would be had then, and then–!

The wave of magic flood came but it collided with a sudden burst of green fire, causing the two to create an explosion. The phantom roared in rage, mimicking the stunned anger on its user's face, "What?!"

The trio left standing had no idea where that came from, that burst of fire was so terribly familiar, but how was that possible when Malleus was in front of them?

But stranger things have happened. And it works wonders when those things, or rather, that strange person, was on your side.

"Hm. It appears you've exhausted yourself. Very well, allow me to take up your blade." A very familiar, smooth voice soothed from behind him, and a gloved hand slipped into his own, gently taking the blade away from him.

Silver startled, whirling around and seeing… Lord Malleus.

"T-there's TWO of them?!" someone shouted from the group, Idia.

Lord Malleus- the Lord of the Abyss- scowled, looking at his clean double with contempt, "... You were supposed to be sleeping. Did the noise wake you? What a shame."

“The noise, hm? Yes, I suppose it did. But what irked me more was your behavior towards those within my heart. I do not take kindly to those who mistreat for whom I care for.”

Sebek choked out, his eyes watering as tears began to well, “LORD MALLEUS-! Y-you’re you-!”

Their Malleus hummed. “I can see you’ve fought hard, Sebek. You make your grandfather proud in that armor.”

“How can this… be?” Silver was stunned. Was this a dream within a dream? A hopeful vision of his lord coming to his senses? “Lord… Malleus…?”

Malleus glanced down at him, and smiled.

It was Malleus’ smile. His genuine smile when he looked at them, his figure wasn’t coated in blot. He was dressed in his dorm uniform; the same uniform he was wearing before he was overtaken.

“You did well, Silver. Stand back now, it’s time for things to right themselves.”

Malleus properly adjusted his handle on the sword and walked forward, Lilia coming quickly to his side, “Malleus~ You certainly took your time!” Despite the teasing statement, Lilia’s gaze raked over him, looking for injury or a falsity. “Have you come to make up for your childish mistakes, hm?”

Their prince nodded, “You can say this is my first step to making amends. Allow me to handle things from here.”

“Hah! You, handle things? You cannot even keep the people you love around you! This is the only way to make sure they stay!” Declared the overblot, his form charging with green electricity.

“And live in fear of me. This is not what we do to the people who We cherish,” Malleus said, raising the sword up challengingly. “I have never thought of doing battle with a dragon before. I suppose we shall see what comes of a battle between us.”

“You wish to deal with me, princling? Compared to you, I am the King here. I shall send you into the deepest Hells that even you cannot escape from!”

In a burst of magical energy, of green flames and blot, the overblot grew. It grew, and grew- Until only the stitched form of a dragon remained, its ink glass head sloshing with blot. The beast roared.

Malleus starred up at the form, brow furrowing. Sebek and Silver quickly ran next to the pair, Sebek with his polearm, and Silver with his magical pen.

“Let us do battle then, together. Show me the results of your time traveling.”

“Yes, Lord Malleus!”

The battle would be long and heavy. But the victory of spending their time together, no longer hurt and bitter… Would be a sweet one for Silver to taste. And he was confident, his family felt the same.

They’re about to go racing <3

Diatsummanigans!

Serenescribe

Silver stirs to the sensation of something… strange.

He doesn't quite know how to describe it. If he had to put it into words, the closest approximate would be something like… being hit by a pillow, maybe. He knows that feeling well, from his childhood years spent with Sebek staying over at his home after a particularly long training session, or from the days he spent staying with the Zigvolts while Father was abroad. Sebek would always grow irritated with him for dozing off one too many times, especially when he was in the middle of telling Silver about one of his favourite books, or trying to lecture him on what he could do better in training. "Are you even *listening?*" Sebek would yell in a squeaky voice, not yet rendered deep by adolescence, and whenever Silver failed to adequately reply, Sebek would hurl the nearest pillow at him, yelling, "WAKE UP!"

In a way, this feels just like that. His eyes flutter as he rouses into wakefulness, trading the sinking warmth of unconsciousness for the awareness of the waking world. As he blinks away the sleep, reaching up to rub the crust in his eyes, Silver sees—

A small, rounded thing throwing itself against his abdomen with relentless fury. He blinks, taking in the colours green and black and a little bit of gold — and with that, everything finally *clicks*.

"Were you trying to wake me, Sebek-tsum?" At the sound of his voice, the tsum stops its relentless assault, bouncing back to crane its rounded head up at Silver instead. *It really does look like him*, Silver thinks, a soft affection unfurling within his chest as the tsum seems to glare at him with its embroidered eyes.

Raising his head, Silver studies his surroundings. He's slumbering against a tree in the woods, and as his memories come back to him, he realises, with some sinking shame, that he must have passed out searching for the ingredients needed for his next potionology class. *This can't keep happening*, Silver thinks as he pushes himself upright, getting to his feet. *I need to stop falling asleep so unexpectedly…*

But now is not a good time to dwell on that. Glancing down at the miniature tsum, Silver can't help but think of how alike Sebek it is. He knows Sebek would refute the claim, yelling at Silver for even *daring* to compare him to that worthless little creature, but it's the truth, nonetheless.

"Do you sometimes wake up my tsum?" The question slips out unbidden, but Silver lets it hang in the air. The tsum tilts to the side, peering up at him thoughtfully. "Ah, it's just…" Silver sighs. "I've noticed my tsum has the same issues I do, with sleeping a lot. And I thought… since you two know each other, if you do the same for him too."

Sebek's tsum blinks up at him, before it tilts backwards. A proud countenance comes over it, what Silver recognises as the smug, self-assured way Sebek will sometimes carry himself. He can't help but smile at it.

"I'll take that as a yes, then."

"TSUM! I mean, sir— I mean, *LILIA-TSUM*—! I beg of you, *please stop!*"

But Sebek's cries, loud and frantic as they may be, ultimately fall upon deaf ears. All he can do is watch in horror as the tsum resembling Lilia jumps gleefully about the kitchen of the Diasomnia dormitory, leaving a trail of carnage — and an awfully *putrid* stench! — in its wake.

Truly, Sebek thinks, as he reaches up to pinch his nose, *this is a complete and utter disaster*. *Who* allowed this to happen? *Why* was Sir Lilia-tsum allowed full access to the kitchen, knowing full well how much of an… *ahem, interesting* chef his fae counterpart was?

To make matters worse, the dismal state of the kitchen meant he lost his bet to Silver. Sebek had stubbornly fought for Lilia's honour, insisting that even if his cooking skills were an acquired taste, surely that did not mean his tsum would fare the same? "*How dare you make such brazen assumptions?*" he yelled at Silver, only for the human boy to blink at him with his usual exhaustion.

"*Father isn't a good cook, Sebek,*" was all Silver had said. "*I fail to see why it wouldn't apply to his tsum too.*"

Grumbling, Sebek storms into the kitchen, irritation festering within him at the thought of doing Silver's laundry for a week.

With as much respect as he can muster, he picks up the tsum by the back of its coat, causing it to squirm and kick its little body frantically, swaying about. "Sir Lilia-tsum," Sebek calls, voice nasally thanks to his pinched-off nose, "with all due respect, *what* are you doing?"

The tsum ceases its kicking at once upon hearing his voice — a reaction that fills Sebek with much pride… until the tsum manages to slide out of his grasp. *The slippery sneak!* It tumbles to the countertop, but seems scarcely hindered by the impact; instead, the tsum begins to sprint around with as much enthusiasm as its little body can muster, a marvel of endurance that Sebek, briefly, gapes at.

Except all too soon, the tsum is back before him, carrying a spoon in its stubby little hands. Raising it to him, staring up at him expectantly.

Sebek stares at a spoonful of bubbling black ooze, the foul stench burning his nose hairs as he sucks in a shaky breath.

Oh no.

"I— I really could not, Sir Lilia-tsum," Sebek begins, only for the tsum to level him with a menacing glare. Sweat starts beading along the back of his neck, his heartbeat growing faster. "No, truly, this is— this is kind of you, but I'm rather full from lunch, I swear—"

The tsum hops closer, spoon held tightly in its hand.

In that moment, Sebek closes his eyes and grimly accepts his fate.

If searching for Malleus is hard, finding his tsum is even harder.

“Now where could he be?” Lilia murmurs to himself, scratching his chin as he paces around campus. He’s already tried Malleus’ usual hauntings, reasoning with himself that, as another version of the fae prince, surely his tsum would share similar tastes. But his visits to Ramshackle came up empty, save for a yowling Grim demanding food, and a thorough search around the Diasomnia dormitory brought about nothing.

Lilia knows Malleus is cranky about his tsum’s absence, even if he doesn’t say so. It’s obvious from the thunder rattling the skies of Diasomnia’s dormitory that Malleus is annoyed his tsum hasn’t returned yet, given their plans to spend time together. They’re like two peas in a pod, aren’t they? Lilia muses to himself as he searches around campus, poking his head in every nook and cranny. Both of them are miffed when they’re forgotten about… yet they forget easily, do they not?

It isn’t until he catches a glimpse of something tiny and round that Lilia finds it. In a flash, he snaps his head upwards, peering at the many roofs of Night Raven College, where—

There!

In a flurry of magic, Lilia boosts himself upwards — up and up until he reaches it. The tsum doesn’t even notice him arriving, distracted as it is; it keeps bouncing around a gargoyle at the edge of a spire, wiggling its little body with boundless joy.

It’s adorable, really, Lilia admits as his lips curve into a smile. There’s something about Malleus-tsum that reminds Lilia of the best parts of Malleus, the things so few people get to see. Obviously, it’s not exactly the same; the gleam in Malleus’ green eyes and the ceaseless chattering of his voice is very different from the full-body bounces of his tsum, one less restrained than the other.

But then again, does it have to be the same?

“There you are, Malleus-tsum,” Lilia croons, dropping down and crossing his legs on the roof’s edge. The tsum jolts, whirling around as it kicks its stubby little legs; in the sky, there’s a flash and a sudden boom, followed by a faint shriek — the unfortunate students who nearly got struck by lightning, Lilia assumes.

The tsum seems to glower as it calms down. Lilia has to bite back a laugh. It's just—

It reminds him *so much* of Malleus.

"Oh, don't give me that look," he chides lightly, grinning all the while. "I did you a favour looking for you! You've kept poor Malleus waiting for too long, *hm*? He's been looking *very* forward to playing chess with you, you know?"

He has to duck his head and bite his fist to avoid bursting into laughter as the tsum nearly falls off the roof. Lilia knows Malleus well — and that means he knows the tsum too. He *knows* it would be irritated if he laughed at it.

He can't help it, though. It's hard not to laugh when the two of them — tsum and fae — are so *alike*. Passionate, emotional, even forgetful!

"Come, now," Lilia tells it, reaching out to let it clamber onto his hand. Magic sparks around him as he carries the tsum, giving it a wink. "We ought not to keep Malleus waiting!"

"Just what, exactly, are you doing up there?"

Malleus does not get a reply. Not that he expected one, given the tsums' general inability to talk. Still, he feels he can infer enough of a response by the way Silver's tsum seems to cock its head at him, body shifting with the movement. *It's curious about my question*, Malleus guesses.

He sighs. "It is a reasonable question, Silver-tsum," he tells it as he takes to the air, higher and higher until he reaches the branch. Reaching out, Malleus picks up the tiny tsum, the spitting image of Silver himself. "Why, in the name of the Thorn Fairy, are you in a *bird's nest*?"

Much like Silver, the tsum has the tendency to fall asleep in a variety of places. Even so, those places have all felt reasonable thus far — under the shade of a tree, sprawled out on a couch in Diasomnia's lounge, or even while atop his look-alike's head.

A bird's nest, though — that, Malleus feels, is different. He only bites back another sigh as he plucks out the stray twigs snagged in the tsum's hair and clothes. "There," he says as soon as he's done, dropping the last splintered branch to the ground. "Now—"

The way the tsum suddenly bounces on his hand is the only warning he gets before he feels something pecking at his horns. With a jerk, Malleus whirls around in mid-air, coming face to face with an *eagle*, who screeches at him with a vicious anger. And as the bird tries and fails to dive for the tsum in Malleus' hand…

All of a sudden, it hits him.

"You have Silver's affinity for animals as well, do you not?" Malleus asks, turning his focus to the tsum as he temporarily casts a spell to freeze the eagle in place. There, it hangs suspended in the air, beak wide open and eyes sharp with violence. "Is that why this eagle is attempting to attack me? Does it believe I am trying to displace you?"

At that, the tsum seems to nod.

"How ludicrous," Malleus mutters, a brief flicker of annoyance crossing his face. He snaps his fingers, banishes the bird somewhere else — unfrozen, but hopefully far enough away that it won't attempt to tsum-nap Silver's counterpart again. "To attack me out of anger that I am saving you… such a creature has no reason to stay within school grounds."

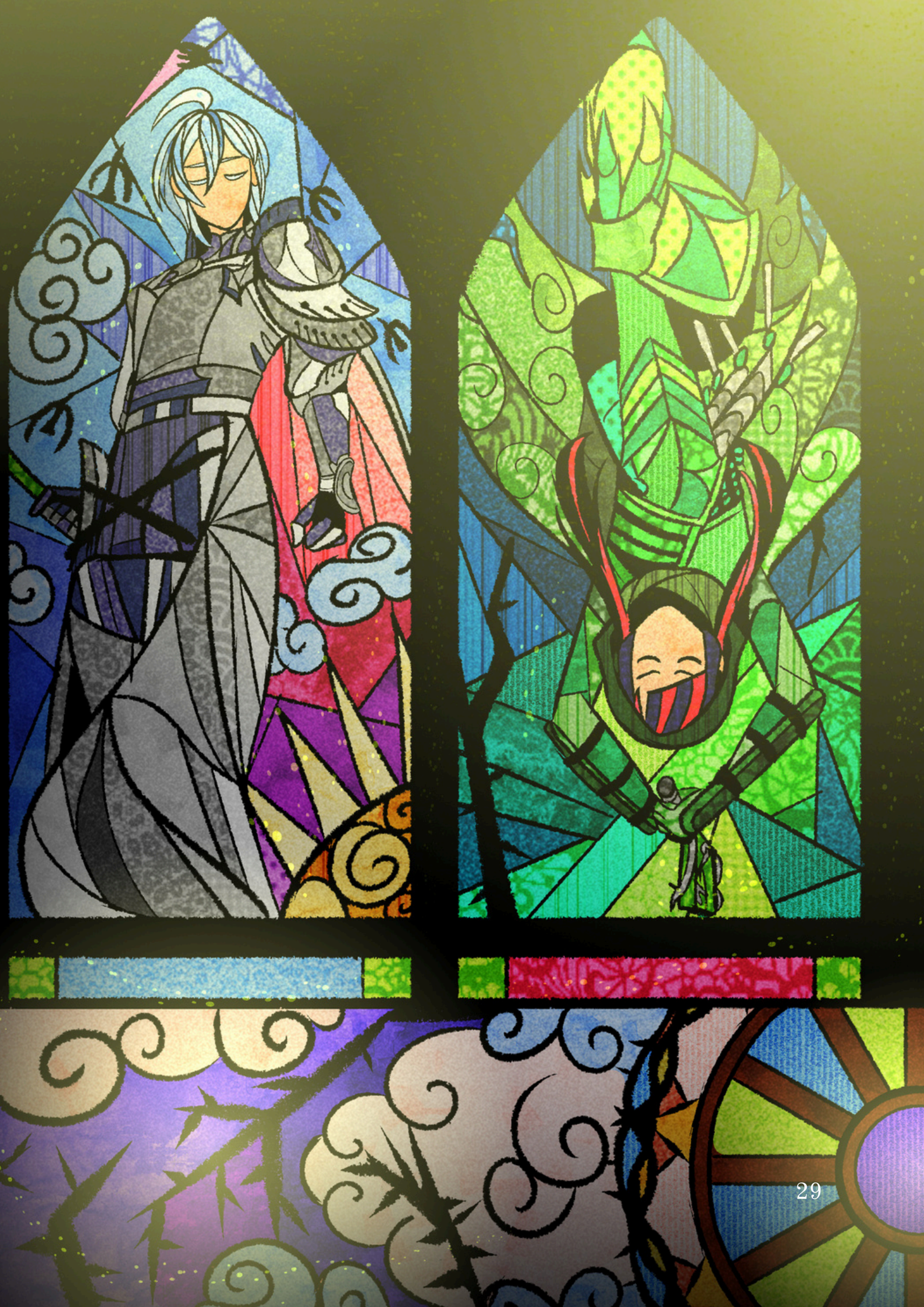
There is no response.

"...Hm?"

Peering down, Malleus' eyes widen.

Practically melting into the palm of his hand is the tsum, its eyes firmly shut, seemingly sagging into peaceful rest. At once, all of Malleus' lingering displeasure vanishes, evaporated by such a sweet sight — of Silver, or a version of him, resting so soundly within his hands.

It is a sign of trust — and Malleus cannot help but smile at it, warmly contented.



My Kind King

Audrey

“Those freaks of nature shouldn’t even exist.”

That was one of the first instances in Sebek’s memory that he could remember a fae looking down on him and his siblings in disgust.

His family usually got many stares from local humans in human villages, some even outwardly questioning his parent’s relationship in front of them when they were just trying to enjoy themselves on a day out.

The Fae Capital was different. They only wanted to spend some time enjoying their mother’s culture, they wondered why dad couldn’t go; now they saw why.

Sebek’s siblings were decently older than him and more versed with this kind of vitriol… They also looked more fae than he did.

The Fae gentleman, possibly his Grandfather’s age, looked at Sebek specifically and turned up his nose. His eyes and fangs may have resembled fae traits, but his ears were a dead giveaway that he was not fully one of them.

That look of disdain spoke louder than his grandfather’s usual silence in the presence of his father.

He had known for a long time there was a part of him that fae could not accept. Grandfather was grumpy, but he never turned him away. He’d leave him all sorts of treats and gifted him many books.

But still, as soon as his human father came to pick him up, his warm Grandfather suddenly felt very cold, and he knew that maybe…If he hadn’t inherited his mother’s eyes…Could Grandfather find it impossible to look at him?

Sebek tried to be strong and act as if the stranger's disgust didn't bother him. He acted like it didn't bug him the entire day.

It wasn't until he and his siblings spent the night at Grandfather's house that he began to cry.

It wasn't fair. He didn't ask to be half-human.

Would everyone hate him forever?

His grandfather heard him sniffling that night and took him out to his front porch overlooking the river. There were fireflies filling the forest with little specks of light.

"What's wrong?" Baur asked, looking down at him.

"Everyone hates me. I can never be like you, Grandpa. I'll never be a soldier like you and Sir Lilia. The Prince probably hates me too." He sobbed.

His Grandfather, whose physical comfort was few and far between, placed a hand on his back.

"Not everyone hates you, the Prince surely wouldn't." Baur told him, "If you truly want to be like me when you grow older…Then I will take you to someone who will train you, a fae who will most certainly accept you."

Sebek looks up at him with wide, tear-filled eyes, "Sir Lilia?"

"Yes, and you'll make a fine member of the fae army one day. They'll be grateful to have you there." Baur assured him.

He loved Grandfather. He could only hope he could live up to his expectations…

To his pleasant surprise, Lilia was indeed as accepting as Baur described, filled with a strange warmth for him he never expected to find in the former fierce General of the Right. Interestingly enough, Lilia had a human child around his age living with him in his humble cottage in the woods.

Together they trained, fighting with wooden swords and scaling steep rock formations.
His new sparring partner, Silver, talked about how the Prince of Briar Valley has been visiting him since he was a baby.

Jealousy began to fester in him nearly instantly. What a quaint little life this human lived… Beloved by such honorable Fae when he had grown up scorned by others.

Of course, after his spiteful outbursts where he would try and fail to best Silver in mock battle, regret would creep up in him, because Silver did not deserve his ire. Silver never ventured into the towns Sebek went to…

Silver's world felt like a dream that Sebek often fantasized about escaping to…Living deep in the woods, free from the judgment of the bustling fae and human towns.

The magic was only enhanced by his first meeting with the Prince.

He had come to the cottage and found that no one was waiting for him outside, so he knocked on the door and Lilia opened it.

"Oh, Sebek! Good morning, come on in!" Lilia opened the door wider for him.

The cottage was an organized mess. Lilia brought home many souvenirs from his travels and Silver would try to find places for all of them without leaving the house too cluttered to navigate through.

"Where's Silver?" He asks, usually at this time Silver was shambling together some breakfast to the best of his ability.

"Still fast asleep in bed. I tried waking him but it looks like we'll be having a late start to today's training." Lilia explained.

If Lilia could do nothing about it, then Sebek supposed it was best to just leave him be. Sebek would chide him for it later.

"You could wait for him if you'd like," Lilia offered, but Sebek felt declined.

“I’d prefer to use this time to brush up on my training.” Sebek requested.

Lilia chuckled and ruffled up his hair, ruining the shape he had slicked it back into, “My boy, you are a marvel student. Be sure to take breaks!”

“Yes, sir!” He exclaimed and hurried back out the door to practice.

He swung his wooden sword around as he ran in the woods, practicing his slashes and stabs on the trees and stray Cattails by the riverside. The nature of Briar land was his audience, and in every blade of grass, he saw a person- human and fae, that he yearned to impress.

Because surely he’d find his place in this world if he became a respectable knight they could look up to, and he in turn would protect them.

A voice he had never heard before appeared before him, “You’re training hard as usual.”

He looked up and saw the elusive prince, with distinctive black horns and long dark hair, wearing an ebony cloak that made him appear like a beautiful shadow. Right in front of him, that’s where the Prince stood.

Had the Prince come to visit Lilia’s cottage and he just happened upon him? What were the odds! Sebek nervously brushed up his hair to look more presentable and straightened his posture.

Prince Malleus was showing himself to him, not just Lilia or Silver who he was practically family with. Sebek, the half-fae, the ‘freak of nature’ that shouldn’t exist. His deep emerald eyes looked right into him, like he could so easily ignore his ancestry.

Their pupils were shaped the same, after all.

“Yes, your Highness,” Sebek replies with all the decorum he could muster out of his little body, he just hoped it was enough as to not offend the Prince.

“Lilia spoke highly of your efforts. Do keep up the good work.” Malleus encouraged and reached a hand out above his head.

His words were sweet, but was the Prince trying to smite him? Did he do something wrong? Should he not have looked the Prince in the eyes?

Malleus took his hand back, “Oh, do you not enjoy head pats? My apologies, I’m too used to Silver’s laxness.”

“N-No! I…” Sebek stumbled over his words, and a certain shame began to creep up on him, “I don’t think you should touch my head.”

“Why not?” Malleus asks, now leaning closer to his height. The Prince was lowering himself to Sebek’s level, as if sensing his unease and wanting to amend it.

“I may not be entirely human, but I’m not entirely fae either. I’m only half.” Sebek feebly argued.

He put up a show in front of Silver and Lilia, but he couldn’t hide from the Prince…To declare himself a fae in front of the future King of Briar Valley would just be deplorable.

Malleus didn’t seem phased by how strange and unusual his existence was, and continued to speak to him the way an older brother would.

“There’s nothing wrong with being half-fae.” Malleus said with such confidence, Sebek was almost convinced on the spot.

“There’s not?” He asks.

“Not at all. You are a good student to Lilia, aren't you? You’re Silver’s friend as well.” Malleus told him, “You train diligently and care deeply about those closest to you. To me, you sound like you will grow into a fine young man.”

All of those things were true, weren’t they? If the Prince of Briar Valley, the greatest fae in all of existence, could view Sebek as someone good who deserved to live, then…Maybe he *did.*

“Thank you, your Highness!” Sebek exclaimed in a loud and gracious voice, Malleus chuckled at his volume, reminding him of how Baur acted in Malleus’s own youth, most likely.

“You’re my vassal, aren’t you? Then I am your liege. You may address me in whatever way you choose.” Malleus encouraged, “So long as it isn’t Mal, I’m certainly glad Silver has reached the age where he can pronounce his words better.”

“Yes, my Liege!” Sebek said with an equally enthused shout.

Malleus reached his hand out and this time, Sebek did not shy away from the praise and the head pats he craved. After his hair was sufficiently ruffled, Malleus stood up and beckoned him with a hand.

“I’m going to visit Lilia and Silver, care to join me?”

He did, and he decided then and there that he’d follow Malleus anywhere. The kindness he was shown was unlike anything he ever experienced. When it was Malleus’s time to take up the mantle as King, Sebek felt as though the entire world would be a better place.

So he trained and trained to become a knight who could protect such a kind King.

The Last Glow of Dawn

Magicalfish

“Are you sure you want to do this, Silver?” Lilia asked. Maybe it was a selfish question. Maybe he was the one who wasn’t quite ready.

“Yes, father,” Silver said. His silver hair caught the moonlight. The light from the starry sky overhead cast a dim glow on the crumbling pillars and vine-covered ruins.

Lilia nodded. “I suppose you should get comfortable, then.” And so should he.

“I will defend you both!” Sebek shouted, his voice echoing off the crumbled stones. “No one will disturb your rest while you use your magic!”

“I trust you, Sebek,” Silver said, and Sebek beamed with pride. Lilia stifled a chuckle. Sebek could be so needlessly enthusiastic, but he had to admit, it was nice to see Sebek acting himself again after everything that had happened after Malleus’s overblot.

Of course, were it not for that overblot, Silver likely would never have seen the past, and learned of his own origins. Lilia should have told him, he knew, and had been planning to. When he was ready.

It had just been hard to determine when Silver was truly ready. And now here they were, preparing to view the past.

A combination of unique magics. Malleus had said it could be done, and had given them his blessing to try it. Sebek had been loathe to leave his liege, even for a few days during the summer break, but Silver had been insistent in his own way.

He must be curious, of course. It was only natural for an adopted child to wonder about what had happened to his parents.

Lilia tried not to worry as he lay down on the cold stone. Ordinarily, sleep in this situation would be difficult. But after a sip from the potion Malleus had made, it was easy.

Next to him, as his eyes fluttered closed, Silver muttered, “Meet in a dream.”

He had to do his part too. As sleep overcame him, Lilia muttered the words, and called his magic, centering it on the stones around them, the fallen ruins, along with the ring he held in his hand.

“All is as if it were days long past. No matter where it takes us, it will all be over in the blink of an eye. Far Cry Cradle.”

The magics mingled, a rush of power, as sleep claimed him. It was time to see the past—more than the past. The dreams of the man who had owned the ring he held.

If this worked, they would see the final memories of the Knight of Dawn. Silver’s father.

When he typically used his unique magic, memories danced across his mind, almost as if they were his own. He merely had to close his eyes and he could see what had occurred to the object, see it change hands, or see shadows of the people who had once been there.

Silver’s magic worked differently, though. For a moment, Lilia saw what he expected—the ring on the Knight of Dawn’s finger, being placed around the neck of a baby he remembered very well. But then the scene changed. Rather than viewing it as though he watched it on a phone screen, it grew in his perceptions, surrounding him. His heart pounded, and then someone took his hand.

Silver.

With a blink, Lilia stood in the stone room of a castle. Banners hung on the walls, red fabric slashed through with an image of a silver sword, and a fire burned in the fireplace by a large wooden desk. The room was lit with sconces that held candles, not by magic and certainly not by electric lights.

And then he heard it. Shouting, screaming.

Outside the windows, the city—and it was a city, though small by modern standards, but Lilia recognized the patterns humans made when they built their settlements—was burning. Lines of houses were awash in flame, fire leaping from thatched roof to stable to road. Shadows moved below, men in dark armor marching against those who wore silver. They outnumbered them ten to one.

“This is it, isn’t it?” Silver asked. He stood next to Lilia, and Lilia blinked. Silver was transparent, like a ghost, and when he looked at his own hands, the same was true of him. They were here, but not here. It wasn’t like normal dreams. This was a memory, a mix of magics. They had never existed here.

Lilia opened his mouth to answer, and then the wooden door at the far end of the room swung open.

A man entered, one who made Lilia’s muscles tense and Silver gasp. The Dawn Knight. The sight of him had Lilia clutching his hand on empty air, seeking a weapon.

But after him entered a woman with brown hair, holding a small, mewling child. Lilia knew that child.

He looked just the same as he had that day.

Infant Silver squalled in his mother’s arms.

“Sh, sh,” the woman said. She held him closer, and then looked to the Dawn Knight, her face streaked with tears. “My love, please,” she said. The tiny baby fussed in her arms, and she hugged him close. “Are you sure this is the right decision? For me to flee alone…”

The Dawn Knight shut his eyes as though the light pained them, warring with obvious indecision. When he opened them, though, they bore into Lilia.

Lilia’s heart thudded hard.

The knight’s eyes narrowed, then went wide. He tilted his head, golden hair catching the light of the sconces overhead.

Could he see him? Lilia tensed anew.

Then baby Silver cooed, and the knight looked back to his infant son.

“I am sure,” he said. “The castle has fallen. You needs exit through the passage behind the bookcase in the next room. I can’t quite explain it, but…I am sure he will be safe.”

“But what about you?” the woman said. Queen Leah. It must be. “You must come with us. A son needs his father.”

Lilia’s gaze flicked to Silver. He watched, his face hard to read.

“I will stay and defend the castle,” the Dawn Knight said. “I will make sure you and our son escape safely.”

“But—”

“It must be done,” the Dawn Knight said. “There is no other way.”

Leah bit her lip, and then turned. “I will wait for you,” she said. “At the barracks of the sword.”

“Take this,” the Knight of Dawn said. He took the ring from his finger—the ring Lilia knew well. “If…If you wait too long, give it to him.”

Tears fell when the queen nodded. Then she fled, disappearing through the far door. Lilia waited for the scene to shift, for the dream to follow the infant, but it didn’t.

So this truly was the Knight of Dawn’s last memory.

“Go with her,” he said to no one. Silver stepped forward, as if obeying.

But instead, the Knight of Dawn drew his sword, and lights danced on the blade. Diurnal fae, tiny sprites. “Go and keep her and my son safe. I…I no longer need you.”

The tiny sprites fled after the queen. The glow from the Knight of Dawn’s sword began to fade.

The shouting grew louder, and footsteps banged on stairs. The Knight of Dawn turned and readied his blade.

Lilia had seen enough war to know the rest.

“We’ve seen enough,” Lilia said. But Silver ignored him, stepping forward. Lilia’s heart thudded painfully.

“Silver?”

Silver turned to Lilia. “Father, I…I want to fight with him. I know I can’t, not truly, but I want to fight. Until…”

Lilia nodded. “I understand.”

Next to his father, a phantom, Silver drew his baton, the implement a dark reflection of the greatsword of the Dawn Knight when Silver stood next to him.

The Dawn Knight blinked, and then looked to Silver. He tilted his head. Could he see him now, illuminated in the last of the fading light from his sword?

Then the soldiers burst through the doors, clad in the same dark armor as those Lilia had seen outside. A man with a pike took the lead, charging toward the Dawn Knight, the sharp prongs flashing.

The Dawn Knight, a tad slower than Lilia remembered but still quick, weaved inside the pikeman’s guard and slashed him across the chest. Silver gasped as the sight of blood flowed. But that was his only hesitation.

As other men poured in, Silver fought by the Dawn Knight’s side. He and his baton were like a phantom, but here in the dream, the memory, it seemed to matter, cutting at weak points and causing the soldiers in dark armor to quail beneath his blows. Five men came in, and when two charged at once, Silver intercepted, allowing the Dawn Knight to disarm one and then finish the one who’s blade Silver had blocked. The Knight pivoted to parry and then stab the third, while Silver stared down the other two, blocking one’s blade and then using the riposte to turn and slash at the other’s knees as he ducked beneath the soldier’s sword.

Pride filled Lilia's chest. He had taught him that.

The Dawn Knight turned and dispatched the two men Silver was fighting. For a moment, it was quiet, the only sound the Knight's labored breathing.

Another man rushed in, and this time the Knight was too slow. Blood sprayed across the silver sword on the banners that hung on the walls.

The dream world fractured, the ground cracking, the stone castle beginning to fall. Lilia hurried to his son's side as the Dawn Knight fell to his knees.

"No," Silver called out. His hand stretched out toward the wounded man, the one who looked so much like him, who he looked more like every day. The word hung in the air, among the clashing of swords and the shouts of men. Lilia waited. But no other word came after it.

The room began to fade. The white of the dreamscape began to filter in like sunlight, illuminating the Knight's golden hair as the soldier behind him raised his sword.

The Knight of Dawn met Silver's eyes. The last thing they both saw was the Dawn Knight's smile as his dream finally faded.

"I knew you would be alright," he said.

"Silver!" Sebek shouted, his voice cutting into Lilia's sleep. "What happened? Why are you… are you well? Talk to me!"

Lilia opened his eyes, and instead of a castle room from centuries ago, he saw the same ruins. If they truly had once been a barracks, now they were empty. Except for one last remnant of that time.

Silver stood, Sebek's hands on his shoulders. "I'm alright," he said. His eyes glittered, but no tears fell. He took a breath, and his fist clenched, his fingers moving as though he still held his baton like he had in the dream.

Lilia stood, and moved toward Silver. Sebek backed away as Lilia held out the ring.

Silver took it, blinking. “Thank you, father,” he said.

Lilia smiled. “I’m glad it worked.”

“What was it like?” Sebek asked. “Did you see him? Did you see his dream?”

“I did.” Silver nodded, pushing his hair out of his face. “He gave his life for me—for my mother. He was…” his gaze met Lilia’s, and he took another deep breath. “He defended his family. I will practice, and learn, and do the same, father! Just like him, I would defend those I love with all I have!”

Lilia nodded. “I know you would, Silver,” he said. “You’re a good man.”

As the two young men began to walk away from the ruins, Lilia sighed.

I would defend those I love with all I have. Of course Silver would do that. He was his father’s son.

But he and the Dawn Knight—Silver’s other father—had done that already. They had secured the future for their son, centuries ago.

One day, maybe, Silver would figure it out, Lilia thought with a rueful smile.

The whole point of what they had done was so that Silver would never have to do the same.

SLEEPING

Down The Bloodline to Your Heart

QuillAffinity

Malleus loved his grandmother. Truly. There was little in the world he wouldn't do for her. How could he not? That woman had lost so much, had given up so much, and yet always made sure he always enjoyed a roof over his head, food on his table, and every sort of intellectual stimulation that came from an expansive library. And Malleus would always be grateful for it.

He'd always love her for it.

After losing so much over her long life, he was all Queen Maleficia had left of her family, her bloodline. Therefore, the young dragon didn't blame her for keeping him at arm's length. Everyone she ever loved had left her. How could she bear to love again with such a history? Or…at least that's what Malleus told himself.

There were times, instances, more often than he'd care to admit, in which he felt the distance between them like a sharp thorn lodged between his lungs and heart. Lilia was his dear companion since Malleus was old enough to remember, and for a great many years he provided the only real warmth the young dragon knew. The only real idea of 'Father' he knew.

Then Silver came.

He was such a small thing back then, a curious little welp that possessed not an ounce of self-awareness. He should've been frightened by Lilia, a war-hardened General who had killed countless members of his kind. But he wasn't. He followed Lilia around all day on soft, pudgy little legs, crying "Father! Father!" over and over again. And, just like that, Malleus could no longer consider Lilia the same. As *his* father.

Silver made Lilia happy. He soothed some ache in the older fae that Malleus only ever seemed to exacerbate. So Malleus contended himself with pulling back, with severing notions of patriarchal affection between the two. Protecting that sweet human child alongside Lilia the best he could. Being the object of the former General's oversight was enough.

It had to be.

So from doorways and windowsills, Malleus watched on. Lilia still cared for him, he knew, but the General was now a proper father with a proper son to love and dote on. The dragon knew his place and retreated accordingly. Devouring whole cakes in luminous halls and burning from the inside out was, for many years, the young Prince's lot in life. He came to hate the cloying, clinging sweetness, but the kind sentiment laced within every confection was too rare and too precious to waste.

Then Sebek came.

Malleus had been a young fae then and better accustomed to his humanoid form when he learned that a retired friend of Lilia's had welcomed a grandson into the world. Lilia had, as he often does, extended an invitation to the young dragon to attend the celebration of his first year of life.

It was a sacred and lively event for every fae, half-human or otherwise. As most nocturnal fae were blessed with long lifespans but cursed with withering progeny. A child surviving their first year usually meant they were to be blessed with a long and prosperous life. The particular child set to be celebrated was only half-fae. And though it was frowned upon in noble circles to take a human partner, that was one of the best ways to ensure a bounty of healthy heirs for any fairy. Malleus prepared the best he could. He ordered the softest toys to be made and prepared a small bounty of tribute to present to the parents and child as per tradition.

When he arrived at the celebration, his excitement had brought a thick shower of rain down upon the quaint little manor. Lilia, with little Silver peering up sleepily at him, greeted him warmly and introduced him to the celebrants. The young dragon had heard of the well-decorated soldier from Lilia's youth and was only a bit saddened by how formally reverent the older man treated him. Baul announced him with all the prestige one in Malleus's position was owed with his daughter and son-in-law all but thunder shocked out of their pride and reverie to greet him properly.

"Are you here to wish Sebek a happy birthday, your highness?" Sebek's mother asked, eyes warm and loving at the mere subject of her little baby. The scales on her face shone brightly despite the post-partum tiredness of her skin.

Malleus passed off all his gifts towards the child's father, the poor human buckling under the weight of gems, coins, and teething toys. And he followed the prideful mother with a respectful dip of his head.

The bassinet was located on the other end of the room, the child's older siblings standing in youthful guard over them. It was a soft, heirloom thing made up of dark brown wood with a soft, white tulle canopy draped atop it in gentle slopes. It reminded Malleus of the little basket Lilia would sometimes use to sneak him an extra serving of bread from the palace kitchen. There was even a small white bed fitted snugly inside the wooden frame and, through the blurring tulle, Malleus could just barely make out a wriggling little thing.

With an excited but gentle hand, the mother drew close and parted the delicate canopy while the prince stood just a few paces away. She paused for a moment to smile and coo at the little baby inside.

What a beautiful expression, Malleus thought.

Her smile bared just a sliver of razor-sharp teeth, and yet the gentle curl of her painted purple lips conveyed all the softness in the world and then some. Her eyes, sharp and slitted, turned downy and dilated with affection. Had…Had anyone ever looked at him like that? Maybe Lilia had, long ago, but Malleus knew such looks, such softness were beyond him.

Oh my Little Squall, Little Squall…look who came to visit you!" Malleus nearly flinched as the child's mother turned her head to look at him. With a tilt of her head, she gestured towards the bassinet. The young dragon drew close cautiously, peering at the small, lumpy thing inside.

Finding a pair of hazel eyes already staring at him.

The child was wearing a fluffy pale green onesie that covered both his hands and feet. The latter of which he was currently trying to put into his mouth. His hair was nearly an identical color to his pajamas and stuck up in odd, wavy tufts all around a pale, pinkish head. They stared at each other for a long, unblinking moment. What a strange face, Malleus thought, soft with babiness but oddly sharp in the ears in the way only half-fae were.

Then the child started screaming.

Malleus jolted back, heart hammering in his chest as he wanted, desperately, to leave. Magic welled up within him. Ready to take him back, take him home where maybe he wasn't entirely welcome, but at least no one hated him there- Wait.

No.

No, the baby was laughing.

Despite actual decades of decorum, Malleus couldn't help but drop his jaw in shock. Peering back into the soft little haven of Sebek's crib to double-check if what he was hearing was really true. And, sure enough, the young prince found the little baby screeching happily atop his little bed. Mittened little hands reaching out for him as a delighted froth of spittle trickled out of his smiling mouth. It was terribly gross and not to mention loud.

And Malleus couldn't be happier.

"My! It seems our little Sebek quite likes you, my lord!" The young dragon felt his lips curl up, up, up. Fangs glinting in the warm birthday light, he reached for the child before his sense could stop him. And as his clawed hands reached out, so too did Sebek's soft, covered one. Malleus felt a sort of warmth in his eyes at that tiny but fierce little grip on his fingers.

He was about to reply when he sensed Lilia draw close and felt the pressure of that small yet heavy hand against his back. Still holding hands with Sebek, Malleus turned to look at him. Silver, looking only a hair more awake, waddled over to the edge of the bassinet. Standing up at the tips of his toes to look curiously at the gurgling baby. However, upon laying eyes on Silver, a strange, wrinkled expression overtook the baby's doughy face.

With the sound of laughter from Sebek's mother in the background, Lilia leaned in close to whisper into his ear. Like how he used to when the pair of them would play hide-and-seek in the bark passageways of the castle, and he'd spook him as the young dragon hid behind marble columns and up in wooden rafters.

"And just like that, our family's one tyke bigger."

"Family?"

Lilia looked at him, his bright eyes having been made a touch brighter in rare surprise. He blinked once, twice before a slow, gentle smile grew along his face. The hand against the young prince's back reached up to ruffle Malleus's hair teasingly.

"Silly boy! Silver is my son, Sebek is my godson, and you…" Lilia's smile dripped a touch more somber, his eyes a shade more sorrowful, but he never stopped looking at Malleus. The young prince's heart lurched at the realization. All this time, he believed his place in Lilia's life was just that.

A perch.

A momentary shelter from isolating rain and sorrowful snow.

And with the addition of little Silver, little, mortal Silver, Malleus had been pushed out of the familial nest of Lilia's heart. The young dragon's eyes blurred. But he nodded, agreeing as he looked back towards Silver and Sabek. The older of whom was staring at the younger with a soft smile as the baby swung his other fist wildly in the human's direction. Oh. Oh, what a terrible pain in his chest! What glittering tears running down his face. What a sparkling treasure before him. And it was his.

All his.

Time Heals All

Hanafubukki

When Malleus regains consciousness, it’s a slow process.

He feels rather than hears or sees.

The first thing he feels are slender fingers clasped against his own.

Fingers calloused from constant training with a sword, Malleus remembers holding that hand when it was small.

The little one would smile and drag him by the hand to show him the nearby foliage and animals he befriended.

That hand had grown from gentle to a harshness found in strength, as reflected by its’ owner, but that gentleness never left.

Blurred vision took in the form nearby him, disarrayed hair and bags under his eyes spoke of sleepless nights.

If he had the strength, he would smile. Instead, the slight curl of his fingers against the other's had Silver shooting awake.

Malleus barely registered the other's emotions before he was wrapped in warmth.

Heaving sobs wracking the frame that encompassed him. He raised a hand to console him, as he always did when Silver was a babe, only to pause in shock on silver strands.

His ears registering the words repeatedly sobbed.

“Malleus."

Oh.

It's been a long while since he was simply 'Malleus' to this one.

It's been too long.

Shaking arms held as tightly as they could, burying his face into silver hair.

It had been too long since he was just "Malleus" to anyone.

He missed it.

Maybe being in a coma state was better, even preferred…to *this.*

Malleus stared at Death directly.

The unknown matter on the spoon was making his stomach churn in a way he hadn't felt since he was a young dragonling.

"Come~ Malleus eat, you need to get your strength up."
"Father-"

"You'll eat, won't you? Do you know how worried I was? You stupid lizard? I'm too old for this, you know?"

"Master Lilia."

"C'mon eat. You need to regain your strength. You look like the slightest wind will take you out."

The slight crack in Lilia's voice has Malleus grasping him into a hug. Tears burned his eyes.

Huh.

He hadn't cried this frequently since he was a dragonling.

So this is what it feels like.

He almost forgot the feeling.

Lilia clutched at him desperately.

“Stupid.”

“I know.”

Lilia broke down crying in his arms; Malleus’ tears not far behind.

The two were hiding something from him.

The shuffling of feet and the quick glances to each other reminded him of prey, antsy before fleeing.

These two, though, were not like that.

They were fierce in their determination against friend and foe.

Their strength honed as if steel refined by a dragon’s flame.

He’s proud to call them his knights. Soon, they would be officially titled as such.
“Speak.”

The startled looks reminded him of deer who would run away at the first sight of him.

“Come you two, speak your mind. You both act meek and unlike the ones who risked their lives raising their sword against their liege.”

That seemed to be the wrong statement to make if the downtrodden looks and grimaces indicated anything.

Malleus sighed.

Maybe Lilia was right, he should brush up on his social skills. He had time now. He could read the book Lilia shoved at him not so long ago.

How to Socialize for Dummies, was it?

Hm.

“Did one of you eat my ice cream bar?

“My Lord?”

Malleus hid his smirk with his hand, “If neither of you had stolen my ice cream, I see no reason for such grave expressions.”

“We would never!”

The two before him look bewildered at such an accusation.

Good. They seemed to be themselves again.

“I see no reason for you two to be burdened by past events. You two should hold your head high for my lineage lives on, despite my foolish actions, because of you two.”

“Yes, My Lord!”

The warm water from the bath soothed muscles, and the steam made it easier to breathe. He didn't want to mention it earlier to any of them about the rising, spiking pain.

Malleus knew it would cause them to flurry into action, calling Professor Crewel and Shroud to look him over. He…was tired. He wanted a semblance of peace.

It was ironic; his need for alone time when all he ever wanted was companionship, but he grew weary of constant questions and worried looks.

Besides, there was another reason why he bore the pain. The sharp pinpricks reminded him of his mistakes, but it also reminded him that he was alive. He wasn't stuck in the eternal darkness as the cold seeped into his very bones; his flames snuffed out as the blot took over his body.

At one point, he had known peace and warmth. An acceptance that it was okay to let go. He could embrace this comfort, a feeling like that of a mother's embrace, and let all worries pass on.

Malleus knew now that tempting call had been Death's Door. He had almost turned the knob and embraced the enticing warmth. How could he not? After being cold for so long? Drowned in blot for weeks, but even beyond that, imprisoned both body and mind in a castle for almost two centuries.

He had almost given in to its allure, but he had hesitated.

He felt unsettled.

He heard cries of his name.

Pleas to awaken.

Splashes of wetness.

It disturbed him.

He didn't want to leave like this.

He wanted to comfort those voices.

He loves them.

How could he leave when he knew they were in such pain?

So he turned away from the inviting warmth and embraced the darkness with renewed strength and determination.

“Malleus.”

The hand on his shoulder, with the utterance of his name spoken gently in a fatherly manner, has him turning to the source. He didn’t need to be wary of him. He never did, even from his time as an egg to now, when his cooking would not abide by any laws of magic.

“Lilia.”

“Come, let me help tend to your back.”

“I can do it myself.” Malleus sat on a nearby ottoman anyway, letting a lithe hand spread a healing ointment on his wounds.

“I know, but you’ll always be a young one to me.”

Malleus grumbled, but let Lilia do as he pleased. He knew that Lilia needed these moments of reassurance, too.

It took but a moment for him to notice the shaking hands after the treatment was over, before they embraced him from behind.

“Thank you for coming back, Malleus.”

He leaned back into a comfort he’s known since he was a dragonling. A familiar comfort he missed even in that tempting darkness.

“Always.”

When Malleus awoke, it was to the moon high above. He sat up from his tucked-in blankets.

He didn’t recall when he fell asleep. His dreams were escaping from him, but he had awakened with a purpose.

“How long do you plan to stand there? Silver?”

The shadows moved in his peripheral vision as one with an auroral gaze stepped forward and bowed.

“My apologies, Lord Malleus.”

“Am I not Malleus to you anymore?”

“I-”

“You were much cuter as a child. You would run to the door calling me ‘Brother Malleus’ or ‘Mal.’” Malleus pouted.

“I’m so-”

“No,” sharp green eyes stared at auroral, “I do not require nor need apologies, especially from you.”

Silver was always one who felt emotions deeply. He thought no one could read him easily, but Malleus did. Malleus could read him more easily than even Lilia, despite the latter’s protest.

“Silver, come, you can sleep next to me.”

“I cannot-”

“Oh? But you used to come begging to sleep with me after lunch when you were about the height of my knees. I guess you don’t need Mal anymore to soothe you.”

The slightly uneven smile and red hue on cheeks have Malleus grinning. Good. Silver was breaking out of his shell. The hand at his nape was always a telling factor.

“Come, Silver. Let us rest for the night. I grow tired, and I can tell you haven't been sleeping well. A good cuddle session, as Lilia says, will bring soothing sleep.”

Malleus beckoning him with open arms has Silver letting go of all reservations before diving into his arms. His arms wrapped him tightly in a comforting embrace, just as when Malleus had first awoken.

“Malleus…I love you.”

“I love you too, Silver.”.

A hand caressed silver hair as they both gave into dream’s embrace.

It will take time for injuries to heal and for words to be properly expressed.

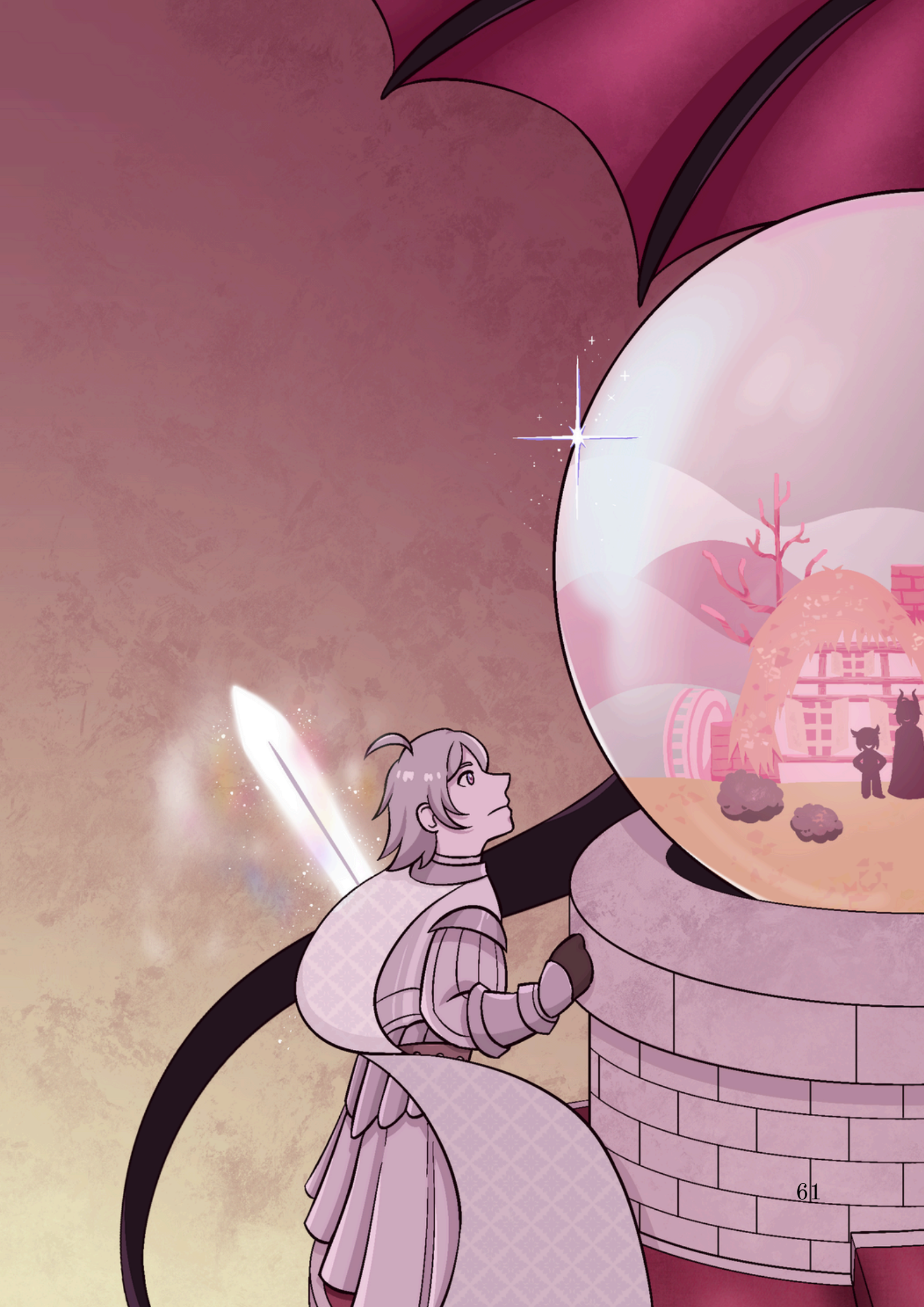
The road to recovery is never an easy one.

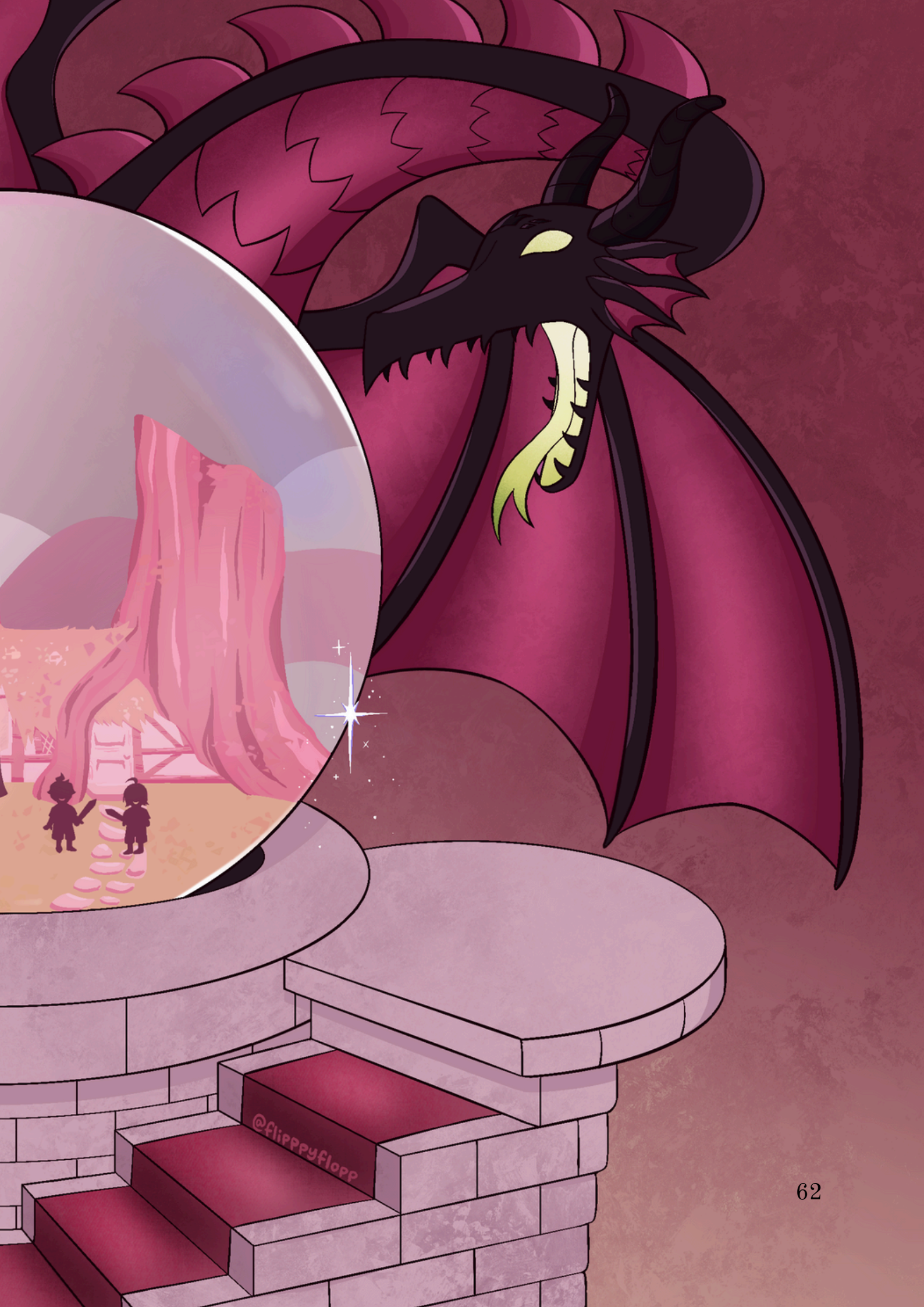
But despite the obstacles they may yet face, they will always have each other.

They will always have love.

With time, all will heal.

With time, they’ll Live Happily Ever After.




@flippyflopp

How to Cheer Up Sisters with this One Easy Trick

Zmzebra

It wasn't often that Silver visited Sebek's house. Usually Sebek came to Silver's house in the woods or occasionally Silver went to Sebek's grandfather's house near the river. However, now that Silver was ten and was gaining more "adult teeth" as Sebek's father explained it, Mr. Zigvolt wanted Silver to come into town for a more thorough dental examination.

Because of this rare occasion, Silver was going to the Zigvolt's house after his appointment to play with Sebek while his father went shopping. It only took one knock for Silver to know his father chose the correct house.

"CAN SOMEONE GET THAT?!"

"THAT MUST BE SILVER!"

"I'LL GET THE DOOR!"

"NO STOP! I WANT TO GET IT!"

Barely muted voices sounded from the house before the door even opened. Silver's father laughed behind him.

The door soon opened to reveal a teenage boy with green hair and scales on his jaw. He ignored a loud cry of distress in the background as he greeted them.

"Lilia-sama, Silver, welcome!" he smiled, "Sebek has been excited for your visit."

Sebek arrived soon after from behind his brother. He pouted. "I wanted to open the door for Lilia-sama, Langston…"

His older brother merely smiled. “Try being faster next time.”

Sebek huffed.

“Now don’t be like that. Don’t you want to say hello to our guests?”

Sebek jumped at the realization he was in front of The Lilia-sama and hadn’t even said a hello. He harshly bowed in shame. “My sincerest apologies, Lilia-sama and Silver! I should have greeted you both forthwith!”

Lilia laughed. “Apology accepted, Sebek.”

He placed a hand on his son’s back. “Now Silver, why don’t you head inside?”

Silver nodded at his father before entering.

“We’ll take good care of him while you’re gone, Lilia-sama,” said Langston.

“Bye, Father,” said Silver with a wave.

“See you later, Silver.”

The door closed with a click leaving Silver with the Zigvolt brothers.

Langston pointed at a small bag Silver held. “Got a little souvenir from our dad? New toothbrush and the works?”

Silver nodded. He opened the pouch to pull out a small wooden top. “I got a toy too.”

“Nice.”

Sebek leaned closer to inspect it. “Is it good? Mine are the best at spinning.”

“My top won’t be beat,” said Silver with a look of determination.

With matching confident looks on their round faces, Langston held back a laugh. “Why don’t you both go upstairs to fight? I have to go back to my homework.”

Like little soldiers, they nodded in sync and raced towards the stairs. Langston quietly laughed and returned to the couch to read his book.

Upstairs, a fierce battle began. Sebek may have had Silver beat in the volume of his boasts, but Silver would not go down quietly. They prepared their weapons as the clock counted down.

Three.

Two.

One.

“Now!”

Two wooden tops quietly spun a few centimeters away from each other on the floor. Sebek and Silver were less quiet as they shouted encouragement to their toys.

“GO! GO! GO!”

“You got this! I believe in you!”

Alas, their battle was not fated to end kindly as the two tops spun right into the other and flew apart with a loud clack.

“Which fell first?” asked Sebek frantically as he looked for his champion.

“I think yours fell first,” said Silver as he picked up his top.

“Huhhh?! I think yours fell first then!”

“No, I know what I saw.”

“Silver! Stop cheating!”

“I’m not cheating. Mine hit yours and spun out while yours slid away on its side.”

“Stop lying!”

“I’m not lying.”

Sebek roared at Silver who prepared to brawl when suddenly a teenage girl appeared in the doorway.

“STOP FIGHTING!” she yelled.

Both boys stopped their lunge at one another to evaluate the new challenger.

“Can’t you play quietly?!” she asked shrilly.

Sebek and Silver shuffled their feet. Sebek’s sister was not to be messed with.

“Some of us can’t hear themselves think with all this yelling!”

Neither of them met her eyes.

“Now what do you have to say for yourselves?”

Sebek braved his sister while Silver tried to turn invisible. “It was Silver’s—”

“I don’t care whose fault it was!” Tears started to bloom in her eyes, “Just shut up!”

That caught the boys’ attention. “Zulma, are you alright?”

Zulma swiped away her tears. “I’m fine. I just—” Her voice caught, “I just want some peace and quiet.”

Guilt bloomed in Sebek and Silver’s chests. They hadn’t meant to disturb the girl to tears. Silver was taught better than to hurt others’ feelings. “Can...Can we help?”

Zulma turned shy. “I don’t know...I mean there’s one thing you guys could do to make me feel better…”

Silver and Sebek jumped at the opportunity to right their wrong. “Anything! Name it!” exclaimed Sebek.

“...You could let me give you makeovers like you used to.”

Sebek stepped back in fear, but Silver only tilted his head in confusion. Make overs?

While Sebek went through the five stages of grief, Silver asked for clarification. “What do you mean?”

Zulma had a gloomy look on her face as she explained. “When Sebek was little, he would let me dress him up and do his hair and make-up. He was always so cute, but now he doesn’t let me do it anymore.”

“Because I’m not cute! I am a cool and refined guardsman!” yelled Sebek.

Tears bloomed in Zulma’s eyes again as she held back a sob with her fist. “Hic…I know, Sebecky-chan, but you’ll always be my little brother and I…”

Sebek felt like the scum of the Earth.

“I...I’m sorry…”

Zulma sniffled.

Sebek struggled through his next words. “I’ll...play dress-up with you…”

“...Really?”

“...Yes.”

Sparkles shined in Zulma’s tears. “And you, Silver?”

Silver took a step forward like his father trained him to, an arm at the ready over his chest. “Whatever it takes to make you smile again.”

Zulma gave a watery smile. “Thank you...I’ll lead the way then.”

The boys followed Zulma to her room. “I’m going to pick out some outfits for you to try on.”

The girl dug through her closet until she found a wicker basket with a lid. She excitedly opened it and began rifling around on a mission.

“Can I get a cool outfit, Zulma? Please don’t dress me up in frills again.” Sebek made a final attempt at saving his dignity.

Zulma only waved her brother’s worries away. “Yes, yes, no frills. How about this?”

She lifted up a dress shirt and slacks. “You could look just like Dad in this outfit!”

Sebek frowned.

“No good?” she dropped the outfit back into the basket and lifted up a black dress instead. “How about this? It’s like Mom’s dress.”

Sebek leaned forward with stars in his eyes.

Zulma smirked. “I’ll just pair this with Langy’s old vest, this cape, and…”

Zulma folded up the outfit and passed it over to Sebek. “Why don’t you try it on while I pick out some clothes with Silver-chan here?”

Sebek excitedly rushed off to put on the clothes.

“Do you want to come over and look with me?” asked Zulma.

Silver nodded. He never put a lot of thought into what his clothes looked like, so this was all very new to him. The basket was a mess of different colored fabrics cut in ways Silver hadn’t seen before.

A sparkling light blue fabric caught his eye. He reached for it, revealing a light blue dress with an even paler collar. Silver couldn’t take his eyes off it.

“Like what you see?” asked Zulma.

Silver nodded.

Zulma laughed. “Might be a bit big here and there, but I think it should fit. Why don’t you try it on?”

Silver made a sound of agreement and stepped out into the hall to change in the bathroom. The dress went on smoothly over his head. The collar was wider than expected as the dress slipped past his shoulders. He lifted up the skirt to avoid tripping as he returned to the bedroom.

Sebek had already returned and stood still as his older sister tied the string at the top of his cloak into a bow. He looked up at the sound of Silver entering. He blinked at the sight.

“Welcome back, Silver-chan! I found the perfect necklace for your dress!” said Zulma with a pat on Sebek’s shoulder to push him out of the way. Sebek stumbled, but didn’t complain as Silver walked past him.

Zulma raised a wide golden necklace. It sparkled in Silver’s eyes as he leaned forward for Zulma to place it around his neck and connect the clasps. The necklace was a bit oversized as the choker rested lower on his collar. Silver shined as he examined the new addition.

Sebek tore his eyes away from his friend. “Can we go now, Zulma?”

Zulma gave Sebek a wide eyed look. “You’re so impatient, Sebecky-chan. Do you really hate me so much that you want to get rid of me forever?”

Both boys went on the defense as they prepared for the precarious mission of navigating a woman’s heart. Their stances widened as if they were entering a spar.

Zulma pouted and let herself tremble with restrained emotions.

Silver parried first. “What I think Sebek was trying to ask was whether or not we were ready to show off to Langston.”

Zulma sniffled. “Really?”

His sword hit true. Silver smirked and Sebek took the opportunity to make the next strike. “Really! Langston should not be left out of this experience. I merely wanted to know if it was time to show off your hard work.”

Zulma blinked watery eyes, but smiled. “Yeah?”

Critical hit! “Yes!”

Zulma’s smile widened as she stood up with a hop. “Then let’s go! Langy is probably downstairs still reading that tome Grandpa gave him for homework.”

With a skip, she waved at the doorway for the boys to follow her. “Follow me!”

Silver and Sebek shared a mutual look of congrats on a mission well done with a nod before following Zulma.

“Langyyy…!” sing-songed Zulma as she swung into the living room, “Look at this!”

Langston raised an eyebrow, but looked up from his dictionary-sized book. “What?”

Zulma cleared her throat. “Presenting…”

She sashayed to the side and with an outstretched hand, beckoned the boys into the doorway.

“...Sebek and Silver!”

Langston’s eyes widened as he quickly covered his mouth. His shoulders shook as he tried his best to speak. “Th-they look gr-great…”

Silver tilted his head while Sebek squinted at his brother. “...Langston, are you alright?”

Langston took a deep breath and coughed. “Yes. I am doing Swell, Sebek. You both look very lovely.”

Sebek’s squint deepened, but he could not detect any falsehoods. He and Silver did look very lovely. “If you say so...Can me and Silver go outside to play now?”

“Sure! Just one thing before you go…” Zulma rushed over to the hutch and pulled out an old fashioned camera, “Let me take your picture for our parents and Lilia! I’m sure they’ll want to see you both dressed up.”

Silver frowned and looked down at his dress. It was very comfortable to move in. “We weren’t going to take them off. Can’t they see it later?”

Zulma’s smile remained unchanged. “...Let’s still take a photo just in case.”

“Alright…”

“Smile!”

With a flash and two twin grins, the boys were immortalized in their oversized outfits.

“Perfect! You’re free now,” said Zulma with a wave.

The boys didn’t need to be told twice as they raced to the backyard. Langston looked over at his sister fussing with the camera. He tilted his head and stared. “...You alright?”

Zulma didn’t look up. “With my old dresses getting dirty? Yeah why not. Not like I fit them anymore and technically they should be Sebek’s now anyways.”

Langston put his book to the side. “No, I mean with you and Ar—”

“The guy whose carriage has three broken wheels? We are good now,” said Zulma.

“Glad to know you’ve taken care of things,” said Langston, picking up his book again, “Let me know if you need anything.”

“Well if you really wanted to cheer me up—”

“I’m not that kind. Your crocodile tears won’t work on me.”

Zulma pouted. “Boo, you’re no fun.”

Eternal Ascension

Vione Hobbes

Once upon a time, there was a young boy who lived in the forests of Briar Valley. The human, named Silver due to the color of his hair, was raised by a fae that was once part of the royal army. He would spend his days being taught by his father, Lilia, on how to be a knight so that he could follow in his footsteps. Silver was a good child; he listened to his father's lessons, worked hard to grow strong, and always showed kindness to the living creatures around him.

Other than the birds and squirrels and deer, he didn't have many friends - the only other person he truly knew other than his father was a boy around his age. Being of both fae and human blood, Sebek was an energetic and headstrong rival that Silver enjoyed being able to train with. The duo would regularly spar and butt heads, but they also knew when to put their differences aside. The group lived and coexisted together, and so they were happy.

As Silver grew up and became a young adult, so too did his father age. Despite his youthful appearance, Lilia was reaching the end of his life cycle - and the magic that allowed him to be part of the world was waning with each and every day. One day, near the end of a snowy winter, Lilia sat his son down before their training session and spoke to him.

“Silver, you've grown into a wonderful young man in what feels like the blink of an eye,” he said, a smile on his face. “And I'm very happy that I was the one to raise you into who you are today. But as you've aged, so have I - and I'm afraid that my magic is nearly out.”

“But Father, if your magic is almost gone, then…” Silver started to speak, hesitating to finish his thoughts in fear of making them real. “That means you'll be returning to the stars soon, right?”

“That’s correct. But do not fret, for I still have some time. And before that happens, I’d like to take one last trip to the Land of the Red Dragon. And with you becoming a proper adult in just a few short months, I wish to give our cottage and most of my belongings to you.”

“But Father, I don't want you to leave.”

“I know, Silver. But you are free to come visit me once I get settled into my retirement. But I must get ready to pack up the belongings that I wish to take with me. May I ask you for your help once more?”

And so, Silver agreed.

Over the next few days, the two worked on packing Lilia's essentials, with the rest going to Silver. When Sebek learned of his tutor's upcoming departure, he and his grandfather came to bid him farewell and to assist him as well. Silver helped as he would normally, but for the days leading up to his father's final trip were filled with sorrow for him. But he refused to shed his tears, for he did not wish to burden Lilia with his grief. On the day before the scheduled trip, Sebek and Silver worked together to cook a small feast for the group. Once everyone was seated Lilia lifted his glass and proposed a toast.

“I wish to dedicate this meal to my safe travels and to you three. Baul, you were my comrade and right-hand man for many years, and I'm happy to have called you my brother in arms. Sebek, I remember when you first came here to train - and you've grown into a strong young man. I'm proud to see you following in your grandfather's footsteps. And Silver…my son, I'm so proud of the wonderful man you've become. To have raised you as my own has been one of the greatest achievements in my life, and I'm honored to be your father. May your eyes never be clouded by sorrow.” The rest of the group cheered to that with their drinks, and as everyone began to eat, Silver quietly made his way away from the table and out of the cottage.

He began to walk into the woods surrounding the cottage that he called home, the night sky filled with dark clouds that threatened to burst at any moment. Further and further away from his home he went, the lights of the house fading behind him. He didn't stop when the lights were out of sight - he continued for what felt like hours, letting his feet carry him until he reached a hidden grotto. As Silver stood alone amongst the trees, he allowed his tears to flow, his anguished cries heard throughout the forest. The clouds above mimicked the young man; rain quickly began to cascade down on him as thunder rolled in the distance.

And yet, he wasn't truly alone.

As Silver continued to sob, flashes of lightning lit up the sky and seemed to grow closer to him. The thunder grew louder, and the lightning became more frequent and larger. Finally, it all reached a crescendo as the largest bolt of all struck the ground in the center of the grotto, and the storm suddenly came to a halt. The flash of lightning lit up the forest in a flash of green, and Silver was able to catch a glimpse of a hooded figure watching him from the tree line. Thunder rumbled low, reverberating in the earth below his feet as the young man watched the figure enter the clearing.

"...Who are you?" Silver called out, uneasy at the appearance of the stranger. In response, the mysterious person simply chuckled as they stopped in the center of the grotto. As flickers of lightning rippled amongst the clouds above, the young man noticed that the rain had not just stopped, but had suspended in the air, as if time itself had frozen.

"Do not be afraid, Child of Man. I am but a wandering fae, who wishes to give my blessings to those I deem worthy," the stranger said, their voice as deep and dark as the night. "And you, little one, are worthy."

"I mean no disrespect, but I was raised by the fae - and I am aware of the customs regarding blessings," Silver replied.

"You were raised well, then. What a clever human you are. Then, allow me to ask you of your woes. It is not often I meet those that are as heartbroken as you. What made you like this?" After a moment of hesitation, Silver explained his father's condition and his impending departure, while the mysterious figure listened. Once the young man finished speaking, the hooded man spoke. "I see. I truly am sorry…but, if you wish, I know of a way to keep your father from having to leave."

"I did not know there was anyone powerful enough to stop the flow of life. You're no ordinary fae…. May I ask you to show me what you are? I…admit, I am a bit desperate to know." The taller man nodded before lowering his hood, revealing curved ebony horns that sprouted from his skull and sharp green eyes. Silver instantly knew that he was in the presence of a Draconian fae - those that were of dragon heritage. His father had told him that he had known one in his youth, and they were the most powerful of his kind. "Please forgive me, sir - I did not know you were a Draconian," the young man stated as he knelt before the black haired male, his gaze lowered.

“Do not apologize, Child of Man. You did not know…but now you do. Please, refer to me as the Ruler of the Abyss,” came the dragon's reply, moving over to Silver and tilting his head to meet the young boy's gaze. “Allow me to assist you. No need to fret over formalities or being in my debt.”

“...may I ask what you have in mind, sir?” With a nod and a wave of his hand, a potted thorn bush appeared beside Silver.

“I can offer you a blacklit paradise. One where you and your father can live in harmony, where every day will feel like a dream. Return home, and take this thorn bush with you. Once there, plant it outside of your cottage, and the both of you must prick your fingers upon the briars. Then, remain awake for the night, until you see the first light of dawn. You can then rest, and know that you and your father will live in bliss together, not anguish.”

With a nod and promising to obey the dragon's words, Silver carried the pot back home, and upon realizing that everyone had gone to bed, decided to plant the thorn bush outside. Once done, he pricked his finger upon a thorn and coated the dark briar in crimson. The young man then went inside and, finding a sewing needle that his father had kept for repairing clothes, carefully pricked the finger of the slumbering fae. Before he returned outside, he glanced over to where Sebek and Baul sleep, and did the same to them - not wanting to leave them out of the dragon's blessing either.

Once the sewing needle had a small droplet of each of the faes’ essence, Silver made his way back outside and coated another thorn with the red liquid. He then sat down on the ground outside of the home, beside the plant, and stared towards the west while awaiting the sun's arrival. However, as he sat and waited, he found himself struggling to remain awake - a trait he had borne since his youth - and he eventually fell into a peaceful rest as well. As he slept, the night sky was pierced by the blinding light of the dawn, and the thorn bush began to crackle and grow rapidly.

The briars spread throughout the clearing and encased the cabin in their ebony branches, blocking out the sun's light. Once the cottage was hidden from the world, the vines crept up along each person sleeping within the area and coiled around them, lulling them even further into their dreams of bliss - starting with Lilia, then Sebek, and then Baul. As the branches of the bush began to wrap around Silver's legs, he awoke with a start. Upon realizing what was happening, he started to pry the plant off of his limbs and tried to resist the urge to sleep once again.

“Child of Man, do not resist,” rang out a familiar voice, smooth and dark. Silver looked up, only to spot the piercing green eyes of the Ruler of the Abyss.

“What’s happening?” He shouted, both angered yet fearful of his predicament.

“This is what you wished for, is it not? A blacklit paradise, where you and your father can live forever in bliss,” came the fae's response. “Allow yourself to rest.”

“This is not what I wanted,” Silver responded, struggling as the briars continued to wrap around his legs - and then his arms - like strings upon a puppet.

“You want the same as me - to ascend above the limits of this world, and to live eternally with those we cherish. Now, dear child, rest your weary eyes…you shall see Lilia within your dreams.” Before Silver could ask how he knew his father’s name, the vines continued to climb onto the young man - wrapping tightly around his waist and chest. They loosely coiled around his throat, and he soon fell limp, his breathing light as he succumbed to slumber. The dragon simply watched, a cold smile upon his dark lips, before he disappeared into the woods once again

Legends say that, if you get lost deep within the woods of Briar Valley, you may find a briar bush covered in dark thorns, larger than a house. If you stumble across it, do not touch it and quickly leave. For if you don't, you may find yourself face to face with the Ruler of the Abyss - who will take the wish your heart wants most and twist it to his own desires.

kavra

The Prince Weeps

Kouro

Diasomia was more bare than usual. This is odd, considering it's active at night with students studying, catching up with friends, and whatnot. There was something amiss, something somber. A prince who was drowning in his grief because his only friend went back to their world without saying goodbye. Or so he thought.

He looked at the stars and then saw Grim. The beast was sitting in the dorm's garden with the Heartslabyul duo, obtaining a myriad of flowers, and he planned to give them to the Prefect through the mirror. He glanced at the trio before deciding to look at the stars again. He sighed mournfully before looking away from the stars as they reminded him of Yuu.

"Why did you leave, Child of Man?" He muttered to himself, gripping the balcony rails with a strained expression. Snow began falling as the trio abruptly stopped their flower gathering and walked to their dorm. Malleus looked down at the trio before looking back up at the stars.

He closed his eyes and remembered the way Yuu smiled at him, so warm and inviting. He sighed as he saw Lilia fly in, with bats holding the ends of the dorm coat.

"Why the long face?" Lilia asked. The fae flew right in front of Malleus and made him look at Lilia directly.

"Is it about Yuu again?" He inquired as he sat on the balcony rails, as the bats around Lilia removed their grip on the cape.

Malleus stayed quiet, looking at the former general with a strained expression. He clenched his fist as the rain poured harder.

"Why do you need to pry, Lilia?" Malleus muttered.

“I’m just worried. You’ve been all *gloom* and *doom* recently!” Lilia said in a playful concern. He floated closer to Malleus, making a pout. He tilted his head before digging into his pockets to get the photograph of Yuu.

In the picture, Yuu is at the Ramshackle entrance, making a peace sign as Grim lies on their shoulders, eating from an open tuna can. It was cloudy when it was taken. They wore the baggy school uniform of NRC, which was a hand-me-down from the Headmage.

Lilia waved the picture around with mirth as Malleus looked away, making a pout.
“I want you to have…” Lilia paused with playful tension, “this!” He showed the picture of Yuu he had in his pocket.

Malleus glanced at it before taking it. He felt the rough but smooth texture of the photo a few times before breaking down.

“Child of man…” Malleus sobbed quietly as he clutched Yuu’s photograph. Lilia frowned with concern as he floated towards the prince. “It’s okay. Let it all out, I’m here,” Lilia said softly as he patted Malleus’s back as the prince sobbed.

Outside the dorm, the weather was getting hectic as time passed. Students were retreating to their dorms to avoid the heavy rain and getting soaking wet. But especially Diasoma hit the worst. It rained heavily as students ran into the dorm lounge to dry themselves.

Sebek and Sliver, the personal guards of Malleus, the prince of Briar Valley, were in the middle of training with wooden swords in the dorm courtyard when it started raining.

“It seems to be raining. Let’s go inside and dry off, Sebek,” Silver said as he put away the wooden swords in the box. The rain pattered on them, making the duo soaking wet. The half fae noticed Malleus in the distance and ran off.

“WAKA-SAMA!” Sebek yelled as he ran to where his charge was. Silver sighed as he followed behind him, running a little slow to make sure he didn’t bump into his childhood friend. When they found him, Malleus was on his bed as he sniffled, being calmed by Lilia.

Lilia noticed the soaking wet duo and gave them a soft smile, “You’re soaking wet, boys. Go change,” Lilia said with mirth. He turned to Malleus and then the freshly changed duo, Lilia let them.

“Are you all right, Malleus Sama?” Sliver asked as Sebek’s face fell as he saw the state of his charge. Eyes puffy and red from crying, the clothes he wore rumpled and wet.

“I’m fine,” Malleus simply said, looking down. He clenched the crumbled and slightly wet photo of Yuu. His magic stone had blotches of bolt.

Oh no.

@NemisisNemi

A Memory Away

Jackie

One, two steps on stone, and a dozen more across the fallen snow. Footsteps left behind, leading onward to a bench made of sturdy pine. A hand gingerly brushes aside tufts of white, its own paying no mind to winter's cold bite. The skin is marred by calluses and scars from centuries at war; yet, even so, the lingering chill does make his joints a little sore. He settles himself down, has a seat, sighs, and waits a beat. He takes in the scenery outside his humble domicile; not too shabby a place, he thinks, to be exiled.

"Nothing like a breath of fresh air to rejuvenate the senses," he says. He glances to his right, "Wouldn't you agree?"

A tall figure, cloaked in elegant garbs dyed black, replies back, "It is pleasant." He takes a sip from his mug - far more meager than the gilded chalices from which he often drinks. As he swallows the deletable liquid, his gaze draws downward to peer at it between blinks. "This is quite good. What is it called again?"

"Hot chocolate!" The smaller of the pair knocks back a chug, uncaring for any proper manners. One, two, three and he stops, lowering his own cup and swallowing the last mouthful, tongue poking out to lick his lips. "It is a very hot commodity outside these lands," he quips.

The tall figure chuckles. "I shall need to acquire more once we make our return to the college." He takes another sip before he adds, "In fact, I should see to it that we introduce it to Briar Valley's culinary trade."

"What little there is," the other sighs. "You know how those ol-" A pause, a mental reminder to hold back his claws, and then, "It is very difficult to convince the older generations to abandon their traditional practices."

"Well, they shall have to accept it regardless." The tall figure looks down at his companion, horns glinting in the setting sunlight. "To update governing policy is my duty, my right, as future king, is it not, Lilia?"

The elder fae nods his head, “Yes, it is. However, never forget to listen to the voices of the people. You must keep them happy and come to decisions about their well-being fairly - a very fine line to tread.”

“I am aware.” Lilia watches as the prince, still just a boy in his eyes, casts his gaze back to the trees beyond. “As I’ve heard it thousands of times in my teachings as the Valley’s heir.”

“I know, I know.” Lilia pats his hand, almost twice larger than his. Just decades ago, it was not so. “I have every faith that you will make a fine ruler, Malleus.”

The horned prince spares the veteran a glance, a glimmer of sunlight shining upon him by mere happenstance. It illuminated his piercing chartreuse eyes, identical to the queen mother he never knew. Once more, the prince looks back to the trees, raising his hot mug to his lips for a sip; the retired warrior forces back tears that glint like morning dew. Lilia knocks back his own mug, chugging the sweet, warm liquid as though it is his last. When the last drop is swallowed, the ceramic cup hollow, Lilia places it down next to him and wipes his mouth with the back of his sleeve. With depressing thoughts swept away, the elder fae produces a smile and addresses the prince in an inquiring way.

“So, how goes your friendship with that Ramshackle prefect? I can’t say I ever expected you two to bond, at first glance at least.”

The honored heir beams a smile of his own, long draconic tail unknowingly swaying to and fro. “Very well. It was quite unexpected for me as well, I will admit. Even so, as you said before we enrolled at the college, ‘the most wonderful friendships are found unexpectedly.’”

“I did, indeed,” Lilia nods. “And where are they now during winter break,” he prodes incredulously.

“They are still in Ramshackle, I believe,” Malleus replies. “They have nowhere else to go, and their charge, Grim, is in need of care, so they stayed.” His brow furrows, expression remouseful. “Perhaps I should have invited them here; I cannot imagine their accommodations are too comfortable. Yet I do not want to seem forceful…”

“I’m sure they would be flattered that you’re thinking of their well-being,” Lilia reassures. “Thankful, too. They are in the same grade as Sebek, yes?”

The prince nods his regal head. “Yes, they are. They are aqt least partly acquainted with Silver, if I recall.”

“Then surely they might entertain a visit in the future,” Lilia offers. “This coming summer, for instance. Just a little visit - no need to arrange something as grand as a midnight ball. Just some travel plans to spend time with friends.”

A smile crests the dragon’s face, a little excitement trace. “That is a wonderful idea, indeed, Lilia. I shall bring up the topic when next I see them.”

“Oh, how I love to see you living so boyishly!” the old man beams. “Your youth should be spent out in the world, not in a drab castle filled with soulless fillegry.”

The heir titters, “Verily.”

Lilia stretches his arms above his head, a hushed groan falling past his lips as his back softly pops. The mug beside him ascends overhead, faint glitters of magic wisping around its body bottom to top. Lilia pushes off the wooden bench with his hands and rises to his feet. “Well, I feel like going for a little stroll through the woods.” He glances up at Malleus, “Would you like me to escort you back to the castle? I would hate for you to lose your way.”

The prince meets the light teasing with the narrow of his eyes and the smirk of a devil. “Are you certain it is not you who would be led astray? You are getting on in years, Lilia - perhaps you have forgotten the way, and would travel farther than you should.”

The old fae laughs, “Ooh, you are such a brat!” He balances on his tiptoes to pat the heir on the head, between his two obsidian horns. “But you come by it honestly, so I can’t blame you for that.” He turns away and walks forward, towards the closed ancient door of the cottage, dusted with fallen snow. “Come and put your mug in the sink; I’ll clean them when I get back.”

The door opens wide and the smaller fae steps inside. As he disappears the taller rises, his own empty mug in hand as he steps forward. One step, two steps - *CRASH!* Pointed ears perk, chartreue eyes flash - leisurely steps become a short run. Malleus is there in milliseconds, gaze cast upon the scene before him. In the middle of the foyer stands his mentor, his shadow guardian, his friend, his- At Lilia's feet is a shattered mug, bits and pieces of ceramic scattered about the floor. His expression is hidden, back to the prince, but his posture is stiff, almost rigid.

"Lilia?" calls the prince. "What happened?" His question is calmly spoken, if not a little perplexed. What to say to him, the elder wonders. For a moment he ponders, fingers flexed as he searches for an answer. His magic was there, then it was gone, flickering out. It is leaving him, there is no doubt.

His end is nigh. How much longer before he joins his friends in the next life?

Lilia turns, cheery grin spread across his deceptively youthful features. "Ah, just me being a clumsy old thing," he finally says. He gestures to the mug with a nod of his head. "Silly thing slipped from my fingers, that's all."

The prince stares at the remnants of the mug, contemplating. Then he smiles in turn, smugly so. "Clumsy, indeed," he taunts. With a wave of his hand, time seems to rewind, the broken pieces of the mug fitting back together as though they were never separated. "Perhaps I should send for Zigvolt to come sit with you after our stroll; for you, time has certainly taken its toll."

"Now, don't you get smart with me," Lilia scolds, feigning a look of distaste. "As you say, I am your elder: Don't let those royal manners go to waste."

"Ah, yes, certainly," the prince jests in turn. With a hand placed over his heart, the Draconia lowers his heas to the former general. "Forgive my poor etiquette, sir. Allow me to speak a little louder from now on, so my words may clearly enter your defeaned ears."

The banter continues even after they exit Lilia's humble home. The distraction was a success, saving the boy from duress. For now, the elder fae keeps the younger in the dark, blinding him with laughter and conversation, so he does not notice the one who loves him most weaken day by day. The boy, the prince, once so young and small, now grown and tall, soon to take the throne. The general, once strong and quick, now feeble and fading, approaching his grave. All will be well, the once Phantom General knows; as his footprints fall behind, there are others that will walk alongside Malleus in the winter snow. Though soon he will be gone, Lilia can rest easy with the knowledge his prince, the dragon he once cradled in his arms and wept so dearly over, will be watched over in his stead.

And should that not be enough, should the prince still mourn and long for him, he need not look far. Even when he is old and gray millenia from now, Lilia Vanrouge will still be there at Malleus's side. One, two steps on stone, a dozen more across the fallen snow, under sunlight or the moon's rays - just a memory away.

DICENETE

Lord of Green

Ames

The air is rife with the fragrance of flame, which licks against the night with tongues of gold and orange. At first glance, one may think them to be uncontrolled and starving, but Silver knows better. He's seen them enough times now that he hardly spares a passing glance, unlike the rapt audience of children.

"Remember when you used to be like that?" Lilia's teasing tone draws Silver's eyes downwards. Gold and orange dance across his father's features as well, equally as hungry.

He hums thoughtfully as he adjusts the basket on his arm. "I can't say I recall it too well. I was too preoccupied making sure others didn't end up choking on their own vomit."

The spring festival is a riotous time of music and, tragically, an excess of drink. Although he doesn't remember staring at the flames too much, he does recall moving around the crowd, picking up discarded goblets and bottles and setting them in the disposal areas. Odds are he'll be doing the same tonight, after they finish their main task.

"Oh, you were such a good boy. I thought it adorable to see you hurrying along and helping people out." Lilia's voice remains cheery as they continue their way through the crowd. The air is cooler with the end of April and the coming of May, and Silver finds himself wishing he'd worn a jacket over the traditional attire of the celebration. Malleus will likely be freezing tonight standing where he needs to be for the event. "Besides, at least Sebek will be around to keep us company. I'm sure his boisterous personality will keep all who toe the line in order."

Silver feels his eyebrow raise in surprise. "I thought he would be busy with his grandfather and mother tonight. He usually celebrates with them, no?"

"Not this time. He's been asked to help with the preparations as well. The costumes are ridiculously heavy, and I dare say Malleus will be needing the additional support."

Silver's mind wanders to the costumes in question as he and Lilia go through the servants' entrance into Black Scale. The Lord of Green, which Malleus has been conscripted to play this year, is a heavy costume. The last few people who were chosen for the role looked uncomfortable after an hour or so with the outfit on. Malleus may be stronger than average but putting enough weight on anyone's head is bound to instigate a vicious migraine by the end. Lilia nudges his ribs.

"Fear not. I heard they're having a place for the Lord of Green to sit this year! Probably because Queen Maleficia put a degree of pressure on the coordinators." Lilia sends him a wry look as they pass by a few guards towards the upper quarters of the palace. "They need the public to enjoy this show, after all."

"I don't think he's capable of getting that tired. I'm more worried that he'll grow irate." Silver sighs, though not without traces of care in his tone. Lilia's smile grows a tad sharper as they knock twice on the assigned chamber.

"Careful, Silver. Speaking things aloud increases their chances of happening." The door opens before Silver can reply, revealing the mildly frazzled appearance of their prince.

Malleus wears a scowl, and his lips are turned down into a rather petulant pout. "You are aware I can hear you through the door, correct?"

"Now, Malleus, you know we say everything in good spirit." Lilia chimes back as he dances under Malleus' arm to enter the room. It looks, to put it delicately, as though a tornado has torn through it. Swathes of fabric here, jewelry there, a shoe that's precariously sitting at the edge of the rafter.

Malleus peers out in the hall for Sebek before closing the door sharply and turning to face the duo. He gestures vaguely to the chaos as his upper lip twists into a sneer. "Ridiculous, the entire thing. Tie this! Wrap that! Twist here! Bow there! A four-tome set is needed just to know how to get the shoes on! It's no wonder over half of the Lords of Green wind up passed out by the first quarter of the festival."

"Is it that bad?" Silver sets down the basket to pick up a stray earring, turning it over in his hand before looking back to Malleus. The dour look on his prince's face speaks the answer loud and clear. "Ah… father, you've done this before, correct?"

“Absolutely not. I am wholly unqualified for this position,” Lilia replies cheerfully. Silver closes his eyes as he hears Malleus’ frustrated hiss in Fae dialect. Lilia is just hissing back when a thudding in the hall, followed by a terrible crashing sound, interrupts the conversation to reveal one mildly despairing boy.

“Please forgive my tardiness, my lord!” Sebek all but yells as he bends in a low bow. Silver moves past him to delicately close the door, though not before seeing the suit of armor lying in pieces in the hallway—likely the victim of Sebek’s rush to get inside. Malleus simply waves a hand.

“You are not late. The other two just got here,” he sighs as he pinches the bridge of his nose before looking back to the costume. The pieces themselves are elaborate staples which pay tribute to the artistry that makes up Briar Valley’s blood. The crown piece, which sits upon the table, is composed of enchanted flora—foxglove, forget-me-not, and hollyhock among others. In addition to this, two horns that are said to have been taken from the head of an ancient beast curve to create a halo-like effect. It alone looks to at least be twenty pounds.

The rest of the costume fares no better. A robe made from midnight, armour of blackthorn and bramble with silver inlays, and vials upon vials of traditional makeup are also thrown around the room. Silver picks up one that has a deep blue powder within. Crushed woad, by the smell of it. “Did the Lord of Green really look like this?” Silver asks as he turns to look back to the trio. Sebek is scrambling to collect the costume pieces while Lilia does his best to untangle Malleus’ hair from his horns. Lilia pulls a face at the question.

“Well, Briar Valley has unfortunately lost many of our archival records, but I don’t think the Lord of Green was running around in attire like this.” He lets out a triumphant ‘ah!’ when he gets one particularly tough knot free before stepping back. “There isn’t even evidence a ‘Lord of Green’ existed—but this is all merely semantics.”

“They just want to see me suffer,” Malleus sighs as he takes the bottle from Silver’s hand. He sits morosely on the chair by the vanity and dips his fingers inside before turning to stare at himself in the mirror. “I can’t even use magic to do this. Apparently, it ‘ruins’ the effect.”

“Do they think your magic will tarnish it somehow?” Sebek scoffs as he hauls the blackthorn armor over to a nearby chair. “Preposterous. I doubt that the other actors all did it by hand.”

Silver doesn't miss the grimace that flashes across Malleus' face at Sebek's comment. It has been a sparse few weeks since that incident, and Malleus is still on a 'magic probation', as many have gently put it. Him being told not to use any for this preparation likely ties into this. Silver steps to Malleus' side before taking the woad and gesturing for him to turn.

"Do you have the reference images?" Lilia calls from the other side of the room, where he's presently wrestling with Sebek to get the crown in order. At the shake of his head, Lilia points to a rather dusty looking book on the table. "We're going old-school."

"Oh…" Silver flips open the book, coughing a few times at the rush of dust, before peering at the images . Malleus leans close as well to get a good look, only to be nudged back by Silver. "Right… well. I don't think it will be as good as anything the Pomefiore students could pull, but I will endeavor."

They fall into somewhat of a quiet monotony at this. Despite an underlying anxiety with the time limit looming, the three attendees work efficiently in their efforts to try and get Malleus as 'Lord of Green'-esque as possible. Silver's fingers dip into the woad before he leans close to tenderly begin applying it to Malleus' skin. The other boy's eyes obediently close.

"You brought a gift basket," Malleus murmurs suddenly. Silver withdraws to look over at the basket in question. One of the traditions of Briar Valley is to bring spring baskets to family and friends, filled with magic-infused wreaths and potions. "I… forgot."

"You didn't need to get us anything to begin with," Silver reassures as he continues working. "We're just happy to help."

Malleus bristles but falls quiet again. Silver knows that Fae have issues with being given things and then told they owe nothing in turn. He carefully turns the conversation to another topic to ward off these thoughts.

"You seem quite displeased with the role. Is it standing up in front of everyone, or…?" he prompts. Before the 'incident', he may have been less inclined to speak to Malleus so familiarly, but in the aftermath of their group trauma, he feels those barriers have been well destroyed. Malleus doesn't say anything for a moment as Silver continues to apply the makeup. When he does speak, his voice is quieter, as though trying to keep the other two from hearing.

“I confess I find myself possessing a sense of anxiety at the idea of this being my first public appearance, since…” he trails off, leaving Silver to fill in the rest of the sentence. He pauses in his application, swiping his thumb at the corner of Malleus’ eye to get rid of extra powder, before he gives a soft hum of understanding. Since everything that happened, Malleus has been more reserved and almost nervous when it comes to interactions. It took him a week or so before headdressed his fellow dorm leaders, let alone his nation, which Silver knows he feels an insurmountable amount of guilt towards.

“We’ve been in an adjustment period, to say the least.” Silver picks up another vial containing a soft golden powder, which he applies to the edges of Malleus’ eyes. “But remember that we are here by your side, as is the rest of Briar Valley. It will take some time, yes, but we are all moving in the right direction now. So, please—if you feel like your mind is getting to you, reach out to any of us. We will give you a chance to steal a moment to yourself.”

Malleus’ shoulders seem to relax with Silver’s words. Then, his lips curl to a slight smile. “I believe I shall reach out to Sebek, should I need a momentous enough distraction to buy me a few seconds alone.”

Silver’s face breaks into a smile as he glances at his companion, who is amid a heated conversation with Lilia about whether the bat fae can put a woodland animal in the crown or not. He finishes applying the last of the makeup to Malleus’ face before reaching up to adjust the prince’s hair and finally withdrawing. “Truly, our strongest soldier.”

The sound of the bottles being set aside causes Malleus to open his eyes. A glance in the mirror evokes an amused look as his hand comes up to touch his cheek.

“Well, well, don’t I look something terrifying?” he muses, before his expression drops. “Alas, the only true terror will be trying to wash this off later.”

“Taadaa!” The triumphant declaration from Lilia makes the two boys look back to see the older man holding the now-established crown in his hands.

“Rise, my child,” he quotes teasingly, making Malleus raise a dubious brow before obliging. Sebek has gathered the rest of the costume and moves forward to begin helping attach the elaborate armor and robes while Lilia drifts up to settle the crown on the prince’s head. Silver continues to clean up the makeup residue as the murmur of voices, and the occasional squawk of frustration, comes from the trio. By the time the powder is all gathered up, they’ve managed to do an impressive job at making Malleus look very, very ‘old-fae’.

“Look at our handsome boy!” Lilia coos, clasping his hands together as he looks starry-eyed at the prince. Malleus, however, looks downright miserable standing there in the outfit. Then his gaze softens when he gets a better look at the delight on his peers’ faces. He clears his throat and adjusts the edge of the armor.

“I suppose it does give off a regal bearing, does it not?” he concedes, picking at the silver inlays only to have his hand swatted away by Lilia.

“You capture the very essence of the Lord of Green! Truly, there will be no other who will compare to the performance you shall give tonight!” Like Lilia, Sebek is downright ecstatic. The incident had done little to dampen his admiration of Malleus, although he is more composed than before when it comes to others. Malleus hums and haws as they give him the staff and usher him to the door. Before they can dip through and vanish to the backstage area, his cold fingers touch Silver’s arm, and he leans down.

“Thank you,” is all he murmurs before vanishing, the lingering sounds of Sebek’s boisterous voice and Lilia’s laughter hovering in the room.

Silver sighs, wipes down his hands, and blows out the candles. He gives one last look to the mirror and the carnage of clothing, feeling sympathetic to the staff who will need to clean this, before hurrying after his family. Someone needs to make sure Lilia doesn’t actually make use of a woodland creature, after all.

@sheyuntw

The Value of a Portrait

Soru

Sometimes, Sebek wondered if he should take down the portrait of Malleus that hung over his bed. Clearly, his roommate didn't mind (even if they did jump past his bed in order to not say/do something offensive in front of the portrait, and thus, Sebek himself), and the portrait did complement the wall, so what was the problem?

The problem was… he would get (lovingly) harassed by it by the idiots he decided to call 'friends'.

As Sebek came to the second year, Malleus and Lilia-sama left for home, with Malleus deciding to pursue his compulsory year-long internship at Briar Valley. As he had said in a letter he had received a few weeks back, he was "straightening out the senate and Grandmother, and clarifying as much history as possible." Surprisingly, when they were hundreds of kilometers away from each other, Leona and Malleus were cordial, and the two countries had even started negotiations over textile production and procurement. This did not ease Sebek, but it only showed the magnanimity of his future king— such a prince who could not be bothered to listen to him had also turned a new leaf!

(Though Sebek knew it was because he was also working in the government and could thus take advantage of his position to force his country to grow and turn a new leaf.)

"I can't believe you have a portrait of Malleus on your freaking wall, Sebek." Ace starts one day after classes, slinging an arm over his shoulders. "That is so creepy. What does your roommate think of that?"

"He is perfectly fine with it." Sebek responds, clipped. "After all, he saw it last year already— he should have no issue with it."

Ace snorts. "Yeah, okay. Just hope the thing doesn't fall off and crush you in your sleep, dude."

As Sebek yells at Ace from where he stands, the redhead scampering away to his dorm, he shudders at the thought of such a beautiful painting falling. *A joke,* he justifies to himself at night as he polishes the frame and wipes off the smudge of dust that layers itself thinly. *Just a stupid joke*.

But the next night, as Sebek returns from an "overblot survivors club" meeting (that is, his regular hangout with the rest of his friends from his batch)—hair damp from rain, boots caked in mud— he finds the portrait tilted. Not drastically, not so much that someone would notice, by just a few degrees. But the gilded corner that he had polished just the night before was now suddenly chipped, exposing the soft, protective wood underneath it.

Sebek halts in the doorway to his room, breath caught in his throat. The room is empty, his roommate is out roaming the campus until later in the night, and the dorm is quiet, for it is a Saturday, and most of them have better things to do than enter someone else's room to tarnish a portrait of all things. Sebek notes that the expensive jewellery made of gold that sits in his bottom drawer (a gift from his mother when he had gone home for the summer to visit Malleus, the officially anointed King-to-be) has not moved an inch.

He moves to touch the portrait, but notes that it is now too fragile to stay up on his wall, and dejectedly, he votes in his own mind to take it down and have the frame replaced the next week. Though it is clearly not his fault, Sebek does not sleep well that night— the patch where his Lord's portrait once hung.

He doesn't bother mentioning it to Malleus in his next letter, either. It somehow feels like he failed to protect something important, something *necessary*— and just for a little bit, he reads Malleus' last reply, just to feel like some big part of who he is, who he wants to be, hasn't been ripped out.

Stupid. Sebek thinks to himself. *It's just the portrait frame.*

And yet somehow, Sebek just cannot replace it.

As the days pass, Silver and the rest of his friends (can he call them that? Friends, instead of allies?) notice the shift in his mood— the way his slouches just a little bit, and the way his hands tremble slightly when he passes Jack his ice-cold lemon soda. "It's because of the frame," Silver explains once as Sebek vanishes into his room, taking his junior's bag from Epel. "The chipping's driven him mad."

"But it ain't— I mean— *isn't* so easy to replace it, is it?"

"It's actually super easy." Silver responds, and Epel's mouth hangs agape. "He just… won't do it, for some reason. But that's okay— classes are keeping all of you busy too, right? I don't blame him— he made that frame himself."

"Ah, then we hafta— I mean— *have to* help him!" Epel responds, hands clenched into fists and eyes wide with excitement and anticipation. "I have an idea— I'll see you in a bit, Silver!"

Sebek doesn't mention that he can hear them— after all, there's nothing wrong that they're saying, and he's honoured that they care enough about him to even ponder behind his back on his ruined frame.

But one day, as Sebek stalks into his room, having not seen Epel the entire day, he notices that the portrait hangs perfectly on his wall— the frame replaced with one of a deeper colour, with the making clearly looking like it was carved by his grandfather. The wood was painted over to resemble metal, giving the beautiful portrait a more luxurious look, one clearly befitting royalty.

At the back of the bottom left corner, Sebek notices a folded paper, which he pulls out with uncharacteristic shakiness. Unfurling it, he reads a short message.

To Sebek,

I had heard the frame chipped. Consider this a temporary replacement until you have time to make and paint another— I do adore your woodwork so.

- M.

The signature curls at him like a gentle, fanged smirk, and Sebek flushes, falling onto his bed with a resounding, ungraceful thud. Even from such a distance, Malleus noticed. From such a distance, Malleus cared. Malleus made time—not just to commission, but likely to deliver—a replacement, because he knew Sebek would never ask.

Because he knew Sebek would never allow himself to mourn a broken frame (such a silly little thing that is, in the end, replaceable) out loud.

"Such a noble thing… such grace, such foresight…" he whispers into the air before clearing his throat. "Thank you, Malleus-sama."

Oh, what luck in this life it is to be seen and heard, to have his grief addressed so personally.

MY BABY~
LIL GUYYY~

Fruit Popsicles

Shrimpy Sheep

You were walking past the Botanical Garden, with a bag of tuna cans, coming back from your short trip to Mr. S's Mystery Shop to go back to Ramshackle Dorm, where Grim was waiting for you, when...

“What excellent timing!” Lilia startles you by appearing upside down in front of you. “I was just suggesting that we should go pay you visit to invite you to join us in picking fruit.”

You ask him what he's talking about, he turns around and puts his feet on the ground as Malleus, Silver and Sebek approach you too.

“I went to Sam's shop and he had some popsicle molds for sale. ” Lilia explains. “The user just needs to grind the ingredients of their choice into a liquid, put them in the mold and then put the molds in the fridge for a while. It sounded fun, so I bought some to try it out. ”

“We also found the idea interesting and wanted to help.” Silver says. “We thought Lilia had bought the fruits too, but...”

“It is way more fun to harvest them!” Lilia completes. “I started planting tomatoes for my juices recently, I really want to know what they taste like in a popsicle.”

You look at the other three.

“Each of us will make our own popsicles.” Silver tells you. “I'm thinking of using strawberries. There are usually plenty of them in the Botanical Garden.”

“And what about the two of you?” you ask Malleus and Sebek. “Are you also going to make your own popsicles?”

"But of course!" Sebek says loudly and enthusiastically. "Ice cream is my liege's favorite food. Popsicle is a form of ice cream so I will do my best to make a popsicle worthy of being approved by Malleus Draconia!"

"And what fruit are you going to use?"

"Only and all the best, of course!"

"Sebek asked me what fruit I would like to try." Malleus tells you. "I answered that I have no preference. I would appreciate any flavor he would find suitable."

"My liege... sniff" it is an honor to have your trust in my judgment of flavors. I promise my choices won't disappoint you!" Sebek addresses you again. "I decided to use not one fruit, but FOUR! I'm going to make a tutti-frutti popsicle. In my research I discovered that a good combination of fruits are strawberries, oranges, pineapples and bananas. So these will be the ones I will harvest."

"And you, Tsunotarou?"

"I would also like to go through this magicless experience. Lilia told me that there are places where this ice cream making technique is done by human children for fun. Was that your case by any chance?"

> If your answer is yes:

"Truely?" Malleus smiles fondly. "In that case, my interest have just increased. I look forward to you sharing one of your childhood experiences with me."

> If your answer is no:

"So it will be a first experience for both of us." Malleus says. "It will be a great pleasure to share it with you." He smiles fondly.

"And what fruit did you choose?" You ask.

"None. As I said to Sebek, I don't have a specific preference for the flavor of my ice creams. I was thinking of looking into my options at the Botanical Garden and decide from them. But now that you are here..." He smiles smugly. "Why don't you choose a fruit for me?"

"Malleus-sama is asking YOU to choose the popsicle flavor for HIM to make?!" Sebek says shocked. "You better realize what an honor that is, human! And don't you dare choose anything other than the best fruit possible!"

You think for a moment, but then look at Malleus and ask what kind of flavor he would like? Something simpler? Something more exotic?

"Hm-hm-hm. I would like you to surprise me with your choice." he smirks. "But be aware of the consequences of such a thing." After you think about it a little more you suggest Dragon Fruit. All four diasomnia students look at you in surprise and with raised eyebrows.

"Khee hee hee. Now there is an interesting choice indeed." Lilia smiles amusedly. "Even I am interested in knowing what this popsicle would taste like."

Sebek was about to open his mouth to criticize you, but upon hearing Lilia's approval, he held himself back.

"What do you think, Malleus?" Lilia asks.

Malleus was deep in thought, so it was hard to tell whether he liked the idea or not. Sebek himself was ready to voice his criticism if his liege disapproved of the idea. But then Malleus laughs heartily.

"I asked you to surprise me. I'm glad you did. Very well, dragon fruit shall be the flavor of my ice cream. Let us hope there are some in the Botanical Garden. But even if there isn't, I will acquire them in other ways." That last sentence sounded a little threatening, but Malleus had that smug smile on his face, which probably meant he had no bad intentions despite the way he paraphrased it.

You all entered the Botanical Garden and went first to pick Lilia's tomatoes. They actually looked very good.

"Look at those chunky boys!" Lilia says proudly. "Don't they look delicious? I started planting them because I wanted to find out what tomatoes planted and cared for by me would taste like. These are the prettiest ones yet!"

Lilia was enjoying spending some relaxing time with you and Silver picking tomatoes. Sebek and Malleus were standing behind you as three people were more than enough to pick the fruits from the three small tomato plants. Sebek suggested that he accompany Malleus to look for a dragon fruit tree so he could pick the fruit for his popsicle.

"There is no need to rush, Sebek." Malleus told him, enjoying watching the three of you picking tomatoes together. "I'm almost certain I saw a dragon fruit tree in the subtropical zone once. We can go there when they finish harvesting the tomatoes."

Sebek was about to say how generous and patient Malleus was when he added with a sweet smile: "I would quite enjoy to pick the fruits with the Child of Man as well."

Sebek still praises him, but also sulks a little with jealousy.

After the tomatoes, you all went to the subtropical zone to find the dragon fruit tree, and as soon as you found it, Malleus immediately invites you to pick the fruits with him.

"Hold the horses for a moment young man." Lilia told Malleus in a tease and with a smile. "Should you not assess the situation a little first?"

"Assess? Why? Is there a correct way to harvest this fruit that is different from others?"

"This may be a tree, but it is still a cacti. Do you see the thorns?"

"Oh, yes, you are right." Malleus says. "But what may be the problem about... oh, I see. Yuu, your hands are too fragile. You could get hurt if you don't use protection."

Lilia smiles, happy and proud that Malleus understood. You say you can look for gloves, there must be a few pairs stored somewhere around there.

"That will not be necessary." Malleus tells you. "I am the one asking for your assistance, I should be the one providing you with the proper tools. Allow me." He extends his hands for you to place yours on top, you do so and he uses magic to create gloves with the Diasomnia design that fit you perfectly. "You may keep them. A gift to remember this day."

Sebek insisted on joining the fruit harvest with the two of you, but without gloves, to prove that he was not as weak as you and more reliable. Even though Malleus said he could give him a pair of gloves as well, but pride spoke louder, and he didn't want his liege to have to assistant him with his duties.

After gathering all the necessary fruits, Sebek will hide the few cuts he made on his hands due to the thorns of the tree. If you show concern, he will hide the fact that he was flattered, by saying that you don't need to worry, human.

The rest of the fruits were easy to harvest. Next up were strawberries for Silver and Sebek. Something that would have been less noisy if Sebek didn't have to shout every now and then to wake up the falling-asleep Silver because it was such a relaxing task for him.

After the strawberries, all that was left was the rest of the fruit for the tutti-frutti flavor that Sebek wanted. However, even if you wanted to help he would refuse it. What's so difficult about picking oranges? He can do it all by himself without any effort. In the case of bananas, you don't think he's not strong enough to carry a whole bunch in one single arm, do you?

"Sebek, you don't have to carry all that alone." Silver says, looking at him carrying a large bunch of bananas in one arm and a bag full of oranges in the other. Silver was carrying the box of strawberries from both of them. "We all still have a free hand."

"That you won't need to use to assist me!" Sebek insisted.

"I don't think you even need that much of each fruit." You comment.

"You may keep whatever is left after we make the popsicles then."

You arrive at the area where some pineapples had been planted and you ask him what he is going to do now. Sebek stares at one of the pineapples for a moment before attacking the crown of the fruit with his teeth and ripping it off with his mouth.

"One! I hae evwyhing I geed." He said with the pineapple in his mouth, clearly intending to carrying it like that.

Lilia started laughing loudly while Silver sighed. You approach him and extend your free hand, the other carrying the bag with the tuna cans, to try to convince him to let you carry the pineapple, but he insists on carrying it himself.

"Sebek, let them carry the pineapple." Malleus tells him calmly.

"U-ut..." Sebek's eyes widen in that sad puppy expression.

"I know you are more than capable of carrying all of this yourself, but you haven't the need."

"Yes, we are here to have a good time together." Lilia adds with a reassuring smile. "Any of us overworking ourselves is not part of the plan." Now Sebek's eyes have that look of adoration, as if he was going to cry with emotion. "Cooome ooon, let go of the pineapple."

You hold the pineapple and Sebek opens his mouth to let go.

"T-thank you for your volunteering, human." he tells you, swallowing his pride.

"We would invite you to come with us to Diasomnia to make the popsicles together." Lilia tells you. "But something tells me that if you don't hurry to Ramshackle, you're going to have to face a certain little feral beast. I know how difficult your task becomes when Grim is... Wait! Grim loves food! Why don't we invite him to join us as well so you can come make popsicles with us too?"

Malleus was a little sad when Lilia said that you might not be able to go with them, but the smile returned with that solution. The four of them accompanied you to Ramshackle Dorm and Silver offered to carry the pineapple or your bag of tuna cans.

Just as Lilia predicted, when you got home Grim was already upset with you for taking so long. When the five of you told him the reason for your delay, he demanded compensation and that was when Lilia invited him to make popsicles with them in Diasmonia. He accepted without thinking twice, and said he wanted to make his own tuna popsicles.

Another Form of Training

It-Happened-One-Fic

You could distinctly feel yourself frowning as you strolled the school hallways. You were half lost in thought as you dodged other students wholly on instinct and walked along on the familiar path out of the building to start your long trek back to Ramshackle dorm from the campus proper.

You'd long since been abandoned by Grim after you'd mentioned that you planned on finding someone to help you study for the upcoming book test on magic in its more practical form. You imagined he was now off in search of something more interesting than studying.

But, his lack of interest aside, you definitely had to do something. Ramshackle's cumulative grades in magic classes were atrocious, and, considering the fact that you were usually helping Grim with his homework, you couldn't really rely on him to drag your shared grades up from rock bottom.

It was true that the professors were all fairly understanding of the fact that you, as the lone magicless student at Night Raven College, were working at a vast disadvantage when it came to magic, but they could only be so forgiving, and you really didn't want to push it.

Especially considering the fact that Grim couldn't use a lack of magic as an excuse.

You felt your eyebrows arch as you heard the beyond-familiar voice that was characteristically loud from just a few feet away: "SILVER! YOU CANNOT REMAIN SLEEPING IN THE HALLWAY!!"

You glanced over, your steps slowing as you felt an amused smile creep onto your face at the admittedly predictable scene of Sebek aggressively shaking a snoozing Silver who'd somehow fallen asleep in the middle of the corridor. And despite Sebek's best efforts, Silver remained asleep. Somehow unbothered by the younger man's loud yelling or the vehement throttling he was receiving.

You tilted your head as you watched the two of them, even though your mind really wasn't on their actions anymore, having long moved on from the fairly typical scene and back to your own troubles.

But Sebek, for all his loudness and silliness that you largely suspected was unintentional on his part, might just be the solution to your problems. He had mentioned how seriously he took his studies thousands of times now after all.

It was true that he could be a touch abrasive as well as incredibly blunt at times, but he was also a first-year student, like yourself, who was skilled in the use of magic.

And while it was also true that you could ask Ace, Deuce, Jack, Epel, or Ortho for help, there was a strong chance that, with them, you'd end up getting distracted by something else mid-studying, as was apt to happen. And if that did happen, then you wouldn't have any success in improving your grades.

If it were just you and Sebek, though, you really didn't think he'd let you get away with getting distracted. After all, Sebek himself really didn't put up much with anything he deemed as tomfoolery.

And, as an added bonus, you were fairly confident that he'd push you to the point of mercilessness.

It was a snap decision, but you walked over towards the young man as Silver slowly walked off from where Sebek had finally succeeded in waking him while you'd been busy pondering your options. And almost immediately, Sebek was looking your way. Ever alert and wearing a distinctly wary expression that was almost amusing save for the fact you were coming over here for a very specific purpose and weren't accompanied by anyone else like you usually were.

"Human," His voice was filled with a distinct amount of suspicion as he eyed you, crossing his arms as he twisted to face you. And he looked for all the world like he was bracing himself for something truly awful.

Which was perhaps why he just stared at you in silence when you tilted your head at him before calmly questioning him, deciding to just bite the bullet and make your request outright, "Could you help me study for our upcoming test?"

You watched as he blinked, his expression remaining impressively unchanged as your words slowly registered with him.

It was only after a few moments passed that a slow, smug grin began to curl across his face, “I SEE! So you have recognized my talents, Human! You have done well to seek instruction from me!”

It was your turn to blink in slight surprise at his words, genuinely taken aback before you shifted, almost leaning towards him as you clarified with slightly arched brows, “You mean you’ll help me?”

“INDEED! Master Lilia has taught that classes are but another form of training, and seeking to better yourself is a must. Especially since your poor performance may reflect poorly on my liege, as he has a fondness for your dorm.”

You almost flinched away from his initial shout, but you relaxed as he continued. Wholly unsurprised to find that Malleus had somehow entered the equation. After all, Sebek was perhaps most famed for his ability to spin anything around so that it had something to do with his beloved lord.

But you weren’t about to complain when you were apparently going to be getting his help without having to do any wheedling.

You couldn’t say the same would’ve occurred with many others at this school after all, and that was even considering Ace.

You let out a slight hum, nodding slightly at his words with a relieved smile, “I guess you can view helping me study as another form of training too then.”

His eyebrows arched at your words, as if he didn’t agree with you for a second, but it only made you grin at him as you continued, “After all, if you can teach someone, then that means you know your stuff.”

He barked out a laugh before nodding as he crossed his arms, “I suppose you are right, Human. But be warned. I shall not go easy on you.”

You blinked at his words before feeling yourself smile despite the mild threat that was there. You mirrored his motions, crossing your own arms as you grinned at him. Wholly unbothered by his words as you met his challenge easily, “Good. I want to pass this test after all.”

And as easily as that, you could tell that the two of you had reached an understanding.

He could push you as far as he liked, and you would take it no matter what his preconceived perception of you might be. And, for your part, you weren’t going to just whine about the work he threw at you. You were going to give this your best in the name of salvaging Ramshackle dorm’s grades.

My Enemy That Wears My Son's Face

Audrey

His mind had taken him back to that moment many times before.

The knight challenges Maleanor to a duel…Except this time, Maleanor doesn't ask him to leave. She allows him to fight alongside her, protect her and Malleus by accepting the duel on her behalf.

The real Maleanor would never sacrifice her pride for such a thing, Lilia knew this. But none of that mattered in a dream. Here, in this world of his unconscious imagination, he could drive his weapon into the knight's chest, bury it in his flesh, and pin him to the ground.

He could render this killer powerless. He could get his revenge.

However, this time…When the knight's helmet was knocked right off his face, he found himself looking at someone familiar.

It wasn't Dawn Knight he saw…But Silver.

The knight's blonde hair bled into a bright silver color, blinding from the moonlight that now hung above them. His auroral eyes squinted up at him in pain, tears forming at the edges.

"Silver..?" He asked, he wasn't sure what he was seeing.

He was so certain it was Dawn Knight that he killed, but all he could see was his son.

His son, who wore his enemy's face.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to…" he tells him, "I thought you were-"

The words don't ever dare to leave his mouth.

If he couldn't unsee him even now, then what right did he have to ever be called 'father.'

Blood seeped from Silver's lips as he pursed them, even now fighting off crying. A twinge of fear washed over him as he tried to remember where he was and what he was doing in reality.

This wasn't actually Silver, right?

He wasn't dream walking right now…

Before he could find his answer, Lilia woke up with a sharp gasp and rose from his bed, tangled in a mess of his own blankets.

He was in his dorm room, it was the last day of his first year at NRC.

There was no way Silver could accidentally slip into his dreams here so he was safe, it was solely Lilia's own unconscious mind that was playing cruel tricks on him.

15 years. It's been 15 years since having him and these dreams where the knight and his son blend into one have been frequent since Silver grew taller than him.

Lilia forced himself up and shoved whatever else he could find in his room that he wanted to keep into his two suitcases. Malleus had already gotten up and his own bags were packed neatly on his side of the room, he'd probably be back soon so they could get going.

It had been a long time since he was separated from Silver for a lengthy period of time. He hadn't seen Silver in, what…five months since winter break? Maybe six?

Usually, he was only gone a couple weeks, at most a month. He was sure Silver was fine. Sebek had promised him he'd visit him frequently, and his animal friends always kept him company. It wasn't like he was in any danger alone.

Except, if he were with Lilia-

He shouldn't think like that. Dreams had no bearing on reality.

Except, what if that nightmare occurs again? What if the real Silver slips in?

He's bad at worrying. This kind of fretting suited Malleus and Sebek better than it did him. He was fine, perfectly fine.

Because if he was such a bad person, Silver would've been gone by now.

He met up with Malleus who poked fun at him for being late to rise, he sure had gotten cheeky. Together they finished gathering their things and took to the mirror chamber to return to Briar Valley.

They stopped by Lilia's cottage first to greet Silver before Malleus had to leave for his gilded cage of a castle.

The forest seems to have overgrown in their absence. The blades of grass seem taller somehow, and there are more bird nests and rabbit dens than ever before. A host of woodland creatures- deer, squirrels, birds, even an owl all gathered around the front door.

As soon as they caught a glimpse of Lilia and Malleus, they retreated back into the deeper parts of the forest where they came from. Lilia knocked on the door in case it was locked and, when it wasn't, moseyed inside.

"Silver? We're back!" He called out for him from his living room. The house was better organized compared to how it usually looked, and Sebek left a note for Silver on the kitchen table with a helpful list, ***'DON'T FALL ASLEEP'*** was underlined.

They heard footsteps coming from the stairs leading up to Silver's bedroom. He came down with his sleeves rolled up and his…*long hair,* reaching past his shoulders…

Lilia felt his body freeze up in a way that was reminiscent of his earliest years, alone in the woods with nothing but a sharpened branch to defend himself, scared in the face of unknown dangers.

For a brief moment, no more than a mere second long, Lilia thought Dawn Knight had come back to life and invaded his home, returning to haunt him and take back his son.

It didn't last long, he knew better. People don't suddenly reappear after being dead for over 400 years.

But it hurt him to see this child, who had gifted him a bracelet of acorns and wished for his good health, as a mirror image of the man he hated for so many years. Silver didn't deserve to receive a reaction so horrified at his appearance.

He didn't notice, though, and he would never learn what it meant. He was more perturbed at Lilia not greeting him as he normally would. Malleus noticed it too.

"Welcome back." Silver greeted them.

"Lilia?" Malleus asked, dragging him out of his thoughts.

"Hm? Oh, yes! Hello!" Lilia redirected his energy into appearing more light-hearted, "The school year is finally over, it's 'summer vacation' as the humans would call it."

"I see why Sebek came to check up on me earlier this morning. He insisted I tidy up, so I've been cleaning," he explained, showing off his calloused hands from hours of dusting and mopping.

"That's good…" Lilia replied, and then he tried to mention what was bothering him in the most inconspicuous way possible, "I was just surprised earlier because…Your hair, it got so much longer from the last time we saw you."

Silver took a piece of his silver locks between his fingers and admired its length as if he hadn't noticed. Knowing Silver, he probably didn't know it was longer until it was just pointed out.

"Now that you mention it, you usually cut it just above his shoulders." Malleus adds, "But this is not a bad look for you, Silver, it would look nice if you wore it up too."

Ah, Malleus, the ever-encouraging older brother. Lilia did not want this look to stay.

So long as Silver was under his care, he'd ensure that the positively adorable little haircut he had been giving him would stay. If Silver were to choose to grow his hair out as an adult, well…Lilia would accept that, but not now!

"I hadn't noticed." Silver admits.

“Well, why don’t I give you a little cut!” Lilia insisted, “Sit down, I’ll get the towel.”

“But you just got back, don’t you want to unpack first?” Silver asks, his hand already outstretched and ready to take their luggage.

Lilia tossed their bags aside haphazardly into the corner of the foyer and waved his hand, “It’s fine, it’ll be quick!”

He spelled one of their dining room chairs and made it float into the living room, the towel following close behind.

Silver was easily swayed into his seat, complacent to all of Lilia’s deliberate movements. He hadn’t uttered a word when Lilia chopped off his long locks, ridding him of that image of the knight that haunted his memory.

He could only do so much to keep Dawn Knight’s image away from his son. Silver would grow up to look like him, that was inevitable. There was only so much running from his past Lilia could do and, even in his old age, he hardly felt ready to face it.

If he could keep this image of his son with hair just long enough for the smallest tuft of a ponytail, then he could be content for just a few more years of his old life.

“Lilia, you’ll need to hold his head up.” Malleus observed, and Lilia felt how Silver’s head started to dip forward when he released his hand.

Lilia was quick to hold him up again and sighed when he heard the familiar, almost comforting, slow-breathing sound of someone fast asleep, “Oh dear, wonder how often that’s been happening since we’ve been gone.”

“He’s fine though, isn't he?” Malleus reminds him with humor, “What is it you said, that a few scrapes and bruises are necessary to grow up hardy?”

Lilia huffed, how clever of Malleus to use his own words of parenting against him, “It’s not that I’m worried, I’m certain he’ll be with us at NRC by the next school year…”

But isn't it proof that Lilia hasn't been doing enough since this is still happening to him? What does it mean for him to be so sleepy like this?

"Oh! I think I'm done!" Lilia cut off his own thoughts and spun himself around to the front of the chair to get a better look, "It may be my best cut yet!"

Silver's auroral eyes blearily blinked open and he rubbed them sleepily. He looked like himself again, the Silver he knew.

"How do I look?" Silver asks.

"The same as you always do," Malleus jokes, but can't stay mean for too long. He hasn't said a single cruel word to Silver since his first few years, "Very handsome."

"You look like-" Lilia wants to contribute, but he finds he has to stop himself from letting the wrong words slip out.

He wants to say 'his son,' but he knows he shouldn't claim Silver like that. He's his protector, his mentor, his guardian, his *father,* in *everything* but his bloody title.

But it felt sweet; that his first thought wasn't Dawn Knight. For a moment, he completely forgot the man had ever existed. He thought Silver truly did appear in that castle for him to find, that he didn't belong to the late kingdom of Bladevale.

In fact, it was his enemy that wore his son's face.

How dare the Knight steal that sweet face from him. And yet, that man created the Silver, so if there was any good to come from the pain he endured, it would be the boy he gets to know now. Until the day the little human passes on long before him…

He's not eloquent with his words and is terrible at expressing his feelings, but he means it with the utmost warmth he can convey.

"You look like you, Silver."

How Diasomnia Won The Interdorm Eating Competition

Magicalfish

Silver stared at the five empty plates around Sebek. The annual NRC cuisine showcase and eating contest was off to a good start.

"Don't worry, Silver," Sebek said, swallowing an enormous spoonful of curry and licking the rest off the utensil. "Look at these pathetic humans who are supposed to be my competition. This will be easy!"

At small tables nearby sat Sebek's competitors—or at least, the ones who remained. Ruggie smirked. Jade smiled, though his mismatched eyes glittered. Next to him Epel finally shouted what most were probably thinking. "You'll be the one to go down, ya blasted—"

"Everyone, please!" Ortho, the announcer for the showcase, hovered above the crowd. Each table held a competitor and their accompanying housewarden, with those in the audience crowded around in the cafeteria. Silver thought it was a rather nice way to showcase food, and build camaraderie.

"The next dish is set to arrive soon!!" Ortho continued. "If you have given up, or…" Ortho glanced at Deuce, who had a hand over his mouth, having already lost to the stuffed peppers that had made up the first round. "…or are feeling sick—please join the audience! And please thank Scarabia for the last dish, a delicious curry!"

Jamil waved from his place by the kitchens. Next to him, Kalim whispered "I wish I could have entered the eating contest!"

"Not on your life," Jamil said. "I'm not taste-testing all of…whatever the other dorms cook up."

Sebek's stomach growled, and Silver stifled a chuckle. "Maybe this will finally fill that bottomless pit of yours," Silver said.

"Still hungry?" Jade said. "Almost as impressive as Azul." He glanced back over his shoulder where Azul stood. "Are you sure you don't want to switch places, Azul? I know eating vast amounts of food is no problem for –"

"Be quiet," Azul snapped. "We're here to showcase our cuisine, so don't drop out until then."

"I'm just here for free food," Ruggie said.

Sebek sniffed. "What a gauche reason!" he declared. "I am here to win this contest for my liege!"

"I appreciate your efforts, Sebek," Malleus said. "But do not overexert yourself."

"Hah. What, can't fight your own battles?" Leona said from his place standing near the Savanaclaw table. "Why don't you show us what a giant lizard can eat?"

Malleus frowned. "Big words, for one who lets his vice do all the work."

"Ruggie's not my vice, which you'd know if you ever showed up to meetings," Leona said, his tail flicking. Ruggie chuckled.

Malleus glared, his green eyes aglow. Silver took a step toward him. "Sir…"

"I am here to witness my dorm win the competition," Malleus said. "It is a familiar feeling, victory. It is too bad yours has never won any interdorm competition at all."

Leona growled, and Ruggie's ears flattened.

"Yeah, well this is a showcase, too," Leona snapped back. "Too bad your dorm has no cuisine worth eating."

Malleus's gaze grew cold, and Silver shivered when the temperature dropped. Then, a sly smile came over his face. "I will show you cuisine you cannot imagine when I return. Until then, Sebek." Sebek sat up straighter in his chair. "Do not falter. I expect victory."

Sebek gripped his fork. "Of course, my liege! I will be victorious, and I will relish every bite of the dish provided by Diasomnia!" He pointed his fork at the Savanaclaw table. "You, on the other hand, will eat your words!"

Leona huffed, his ears flicking. "Whatever. Ruggie, show them how it's done."

Ruggie grinned. "I can eat anything. Bring it on."

Malleus disappeared in a twinkle. Silver suddenly had a sinking feeling.

So much for camaraderie.

"Uh, right," Ortho said. "The next dish is a double! We have seared scallops from Octavinelle!" As he spoke, Floyd entered the cafeteria, arms laden with a tray of scallops. "And…really?" Ortho tilted his head, and for a moment he was clearly talking to someone else. "That's it? That what you…Idia, I don't think that counts, or goes with…Ugh, fine." Ortho drooped a bit while he hovered. "Scallops from Octavinelle paired with, um, soda from Ignihyde."

"Soda?" Azul screeched as Floyd placed the scallops on the table, and a ghost flew in with a bottle of what looked like fizzy water. "You're showcasing our meal with SODA? That was not what we agreed! We're pulling out after this, Jade!"

"Also pretty sure a can of soda isn't really showcasing Ignihyde cuisine," Epel added.

"Actually," Ortho said, looking as ashamed as a robot could be. "It kinda is."

"It does not matter!" Sebek shouted. "I will eat and drink whatever I need to win this contest! If the rest of you are too afraid to try clashing flavours, then my victory will simply be easier than I thought!"

Ruggie glared at him, then chugged his can of soda. Sebek huffed and did the same.

“Chew with your mouth shut, Epel,” Vil said. “Don’t make a mess. Elbows off the table. I don’t even know why I permitted participation in such a contest. Ugh.” He covered his mouth with his hand as Epel dug in.

Thankfully, the rest of the round went smoothly, in Silver’s opinion. Ruggie, Sebek, and Jade ate easily, and Epel wrinkled his nose but did the same. After the meal, Jade merely gave a polite bow and stood up while Azul scowled. One more competitor down.

“There are three contestants left!” Ortho announced. “And the contestant for Heartslaybul has bowed out already.” Deuce groaned from his place in the audience, laying across two chairs. Silver hoped he felt better soon. “But Heartslaybul will still showcase their cuisine! The next meal will be…vanilla cake with raspberry jam!”

“Oh, good, a dessert” Epel said. He turned as the kitchen door opened, then blanched.

“Trey, you made each person an entire cake?!” Riddle said.

Trey tipped his hat, covering his eyes. “It is an eating contest, after all. It’s not meant to be easy.”

Silver raised an eyebrow at the full-size cake that was put on Sebek’s plate, decorated with fondant icing and raspberry jam hearts. It was probably enough for six people, and the amount of sugar…

“An entire cake? This is an insult to Malleus!” Sebek declared. “I will remove the offending cake before he sees it!”

Trey frowned. “It was supposed to be tasty, not offensive…”

“A cake? No problem.” Ruggie dug in, he and Sebek exchanging glances as the cake on their plates began to disappear.

Epel put his fork down not even halfway through. “Too much…,” he said. “I’m sorry, Vil, my stomach just can’t take it.”

“Good,” Vil said. “We’re done. So much sugar—think what it will do to your skin!”

“Uh, that’s not why I’m giving u—”

“Do not worry, Monsiuer Epel!!” Rook shouted. “We will treat you with the best beauty cremes!”

“No, wait!” Epel said, but it was too late, Rook and Vil dragging him away.

“Well, I guess Pomefiore is out,” Silver said. Sebek didn’t answer, too busy shoveling more cake into his mouth. Leona’s tail flicked as he watched the two eat. Bite after bite, each of their cakes grew smaller. Sebek gave a quiet groan as he shoveled another forkful.

“Slowing down, draconian?” Ruggie said, icing on his nose.

“You can do it, Sebek,” Silver said.

“Obviously I can do it!” Sebek snapped. “I don’t need your encouragement, Silver!” He scooped up the rest of the cake at once with his fork and shoveled it in his mouth. With narrowed eyes, Ruggie did the same.

Then Sebek gave a yelp of surprise.

“Hehe, not so—eh?” Ruggie’s ears went flat. Sebek spat something out of his mouth, and Ruggie picked something out between his teeth.

“Oh, I should have warned you,” Trey said with a sheepish look on his face. “There’s a free toothbrush at the center. You’ll need to brush well after all that sugar.”

Sebek muttered under his breath, which was still quite loud. “He sounds just like my father…”

“Well, the toothbrush doesn’t need to be eaten, but…it looks like we have the final two remaining!” Ortho said. Sebek smirked, haughty as usual. Ruggie relaxed in his chair.

“Ours is next,” Leona said. He crossed his arms, looking far too confident for Silver’s liking.

“Next up—warthog ribs!” Ortho declared. “From Savanaclaw!”

“This is your chosen meal?” Sebek huffed as the steaming rack of ribs was placed on his plate. “Such a measly amount of meat?”

“This dish has a special requirement,” Ortho said. Ruggie grinned. “In Savanaclaw, it’s customary to…wow. Eat the ribs, bones and all!”

Ruggie chomped straight through the bone with a loud crack, then swallowed.

“Not something herbivores can do,” Leona said.

Silver raised both eyebrows. Counting the bones, that was a huge amount of food.

At that moment, Malleus appeared in a flash of magic. Ruggie startled, nearly dropping the rib in his hands.

“What have I missed?” Malleus asked.

“You have missed nothing but these Savanaclaw humans being fools!” Sebek bellowed. “I will show you victory, and the famed bite force of the Zigvolt clan!” Another loud crack echoed as he chomped through a rib. Ruggie’s ears flicked in acknowledgment, and the contest was on. The room was filled with the sound of cracking bones as a hyena beastman and a crocodile fae chomped through what must have been an enormous warthog.

Silver had to admit, Ruggie was a worthy adversary. Sebek showed no signs of slowing, but neither did Ruggie. It would come down to the last dish.

“Are the assorted nuts and mushrooms ready?” he asked Malleus. Silver had thought it would be a fitting dish to showcase the forests of Briar Valley.

“There was a change of plans,” Malleus said, voice low.

The ribs were almost gone. Ruggie bit another in half, and in return Sebek swallowed one whole, grinning at Ruggie as he did.

Silver’s sinking feeling returned. “What do you mean?”

I mean I changed the plans," Malleus said, green eyes glowing.

"Wow!" Ortho said. "All the ribs, gone! And still no winner! It will be the last dish—a nut and mushroom medley from—"

"Not quite!" Lilia said, appearing in a twinkling flash. "The dish will be a nutritious mix, made by yours truly, by request of the Housewarden of Diasomnia!"

Silver's stomach flipped. Sebek's face went pale.

Lilia set a bubbling pot down on the center table, and opened the lid. The audience recoiled. Deuce went green and ran out of the room.

"Oh," Ortho said. A small sound beeped—a sensor on his wrist briefly flashed red letters that spelled out "toxic substance detected"—and he turned it off. "I see. Well…this is the last dish! It's…um…"

"My nutritious bat and grass soup!" Lilia declared.

Ruggie's ears went flat against his skull as Lilia served him his bowl. Sebek closed his eyes briefly, and Silver knew that feeling well. Resigned acceptance to his fate. He had felt it every day eating Lilia's food.

"The first to finish wins!" Ortho said.

"Ruggie…" Leona began, then swallowed hard. "Don't you dare fail!"

"For you, Lord Malleus!" Sebek declared, and picked up the bowl.

The two students began to chug. Lilia beamed as he watched.

Then Ruggie spluttered, gagging. "Oh by the seven Leona, it's rotten!"

"Ruggie, you said you could eat anything!"

"Not trash!"

Sebek slammed the empty bowl down, a bit of the concoction drooling from the corner of his mouth. “Done!” he demanded.

“We have a winner!” Ortho called out. “Diasomnia dorm!”

Sebek swayed where he sat, and grabbed the table to keep from falling. “I did it for you, Lord Malleus,” he said, tears in the corners of his eyes.

Malleus grinned at Leona, fangs showing. “Another victory,” he said. “I do so like this feeling.”

“Ugh,” Leona said. “Let’s go, Ruggie. After all that bragging about a free meal…”

“Why don’t you try it then!”

Lilia watched them go. “I suppose it wasn’t to their taste? But it’s so healthy!”

Sebek fell out of his chair, Malleus catching him at the last moment.

“Oh, father,” Silver said, shaking his head.

Just as Sweet, Just as Bitter

QuillAffinity

Silver knew only Lilia Vanrouge as his father.

His earliest memories weren't of sunlight or flowers or birdsong. It was the feeling of his father's long, silken hair against his face. Of the feeling of it gripped in his baby fat hands. That's not to say his father had always been present during his life. No, Lilia, unlike most nocturnal fae, had a tendency to roam beyond the comfort of his home, his territory. And such travels were beyond a human baby's capacity.

So alone Silver was left.

The animals helped. Each of them were kind and obliging in their own right as they cared, quite sincerely, for him over the years. Bringing him fruits when he was hungry. Weaving flowers into his hair when he was lonely. Singing sweetly to him when the silence threatened to deafen him altogether. But no amount of beastial affection was ever quite equivalent to the warmth of his only father. The dull bite of loneliness became a bit more bearable as he and Sebek began their training to serve under Malleus. It was a job, a position Silver was honored to have. Mortally human as he was.

And yet…yet it appeared his human greed knew no bounds. Silver wanted to belong. He wanted to matter to these beautiful, powerful creatures. But he knew, down to the iron in his blood, that he did not deserve to be near them. Humans and fae have been at each other's throats for centuries, his father had even killed hundreds of them in his prime. Perhaps if he'd been adopted by diurnal fae…but no. Silver wouldn't trade his family for anything.

Even if they did make him feel like nothing.

His narcolepsy only added to that. Time and time again, sleep would overtake him, hounding him with soft teeth and cool breath until Silver had no choice but to succumb to the urge in the hours his friends and family needed him the most. Worse still was his companions' acquiescent nature. Sure, Sebek would huff and puff, and both his father and Malleus would sigh in exasperation but…they never once uttered the sort of vitriol towards him that his own mind got sick off of.

“Say, Silver, I have a question for you of a rather…personal nature. You’re free to decline, of course.” The young human looked towards Riddle as the Housewarden paused his routine brushing of Vorpal. As usual, his gaze was steady, almost unyielding, but, unlike his eyes at the start of this strange new school year, there was a veil of softness to that gray gaze, that matter-of-fact tone. Silver’s calloused hands paused as he refilled a feeder bag for his own horse. He paused for a moment, a heartbeat.

Then nodded.

Riddle, ever to the Housewarden’s credit, was direct. Straightforward like the clang of a gavel against a sound block. Silver always appreciated his directness, though he suspected that he didn’t always say the right things in the face of it.

“I’ve noticed you make numerous, and glowing, references to a ‘Father’ of yours, and yet you don’t seem to carry any sort of surname. Can I assume that to be an error on our ever-kind Headmage’s part?”

Ah.

This wasn’t the first time that particular question crossed the young man’s path. In fact it was probably amongst the very first questions Silver had asked his father. But just what had Lilia said in response? The knight-in-training couldn’t remember.

Had his father made a joke? Had that sad, heartstruck look in his eye returned? Or did he avoid the conversation altogether, changing the subject to something lighter, more conversational? Lilia was likely to do all three, he supposed. The knowledge of that fact, the memory of those dodged questions, plunked a familiar cord of hurt within Silver regardless. Thrumming, vibrating under his skin, within his bones.

He loved his father. Truly, honestly. How could he not? He took him in when no other creature - fae, human, or otherwise - would have. Fed him, clothed him, played with him. Absences be damned, Silver had never once doubted the fact that he was loved, very dearly by one Lilia Vanrouge. Now…was he worthy of such precious affection?

Not in the least.

“Ah, yes, well, as you might know, Lord Malleus’s matriculation to Night Raven College was only allowed in Briar Valley on the condition that he enter the school with Lilia.” The lines his father told him to repeat whenever someone questioned their shared background might’ve left his mouth a bit flat, a touch rehearsed, but Silver said them nonetheless. Father, Sebek, Lord Malleus…none of them could lie on account of their fae blood.

So Silver must do so for them.

A particular brand of embarrassment tinged with shame tickled along his skin every time he had to refer to his father by his first name. A father shouldn’t be addressed so casually, Silver thought, especially not a father as good and kind as his. But it was Father, himself, who had always said it was safer to be underestimated, to hide one’s true face in order to protect what was most dear.

“...and so Sebek and I came only partially in recognition of our skills. Our main function is to guard our lord, so some…details needed to be skipped in favor of expediting our admission.”

Houswarden Riddle Rosehearts appeared to consider Silver’s ever world carefully. And once the young knight had finished his spiel in full, his clubmate blinked only once before replying. A slight furrow between his thin carmine brows.

“I see…Still, the Headmage’s poor organizational skills shouldn’t be allowed to have such an impact on you and your family like that.” Riddled huffed before turning back to Vorpal and resumed brushing out his dark mane. Silver nodded quietly and finished filling out Samson’s feeder bag. It was as he watched his white steed eat his fill that Riddle called out to Silver as he left the stables.

“I only meant that you’re achieving great things here, and with a family who cares about you behind you, it's a shame you can’t honor them as well.”

Silver flinched.

Of course, he knew that. With or without his father’s name attached to him, Silver would always be human. Always be the Other. No matter what he does, no matter how much good and glory he achieved, none of it would pay tribute to the only parent Silver had ever known. But no. No, he told himself, no, couldn’t ask his Father for something like that. He couldn’t, wouldn’t allow himself to be so greedy. If Lilia Vanrouge had wanted him, frail human him, to carry his name, he would’ve made it so already. He had already raised the young knight with so much care.

He didn’t deserve more than that.

Silver smoothed down Samson’s brilliant white coat, threading his sword-hardened hands through the stallion’s dark mane to check for tangles. Finding none, he patted the sweet creature on his face a few times. The horse’s big brown eyes stared, almost concernedly, at him. Silver smiled one last time at the gesture before tidying up and setting off for the Diasomnia dorm.

The sun was low in the sky, and the smell of a cool fall night lulled Silver’s body to sleep. He tried to fight. He always did. But one couldn’t fight off their body any more than they could fend off their fate. At least he was able to stumble onto a nearby bench before the heavy weight of slumber settled atop his chest. That way he wouldn’t bother, wouldn’t hurt anyone. And as much as Silver hated this curse of his, he could not deny that a part of him enjoyed the detachment sleep brought.

Like this, the weight of what he was and wasn’t stopped crushing him, if only for a moment. For how could a son be his father’s without his name? Silver would always be Silver…but could he not be a Vanrouge as well? Was he allowed to be? Did he earn the right to that name?

Did he even deserve it?

Dimly, as if through many gauzy layers of tulle and silk, Silver heard the chatter of familiar voices. But he couldn't summon up the strength to break through the depth of his sleep to hear them fully. At least he was on campus this time, and he could trust all his classmates to be considerate. Regardless of how awful it felt to rely on them so often. So, instead, Silver made himself content to listen to the formless noise of people talking above and beside him before slumber pulled his head down into its deep darkness.

How much time passed, Silver didn't know. All he did know was that, when he awoke, his head was resting atop a familiar lap. Well-muscled and firm, but not uncomfortably so. Someone was humming, deep and melodic. And the comforting green firelight of Diasomnia flickered all around him. Silver shifted from his reclining position as a steady hand threaded through his fine hair.

"Father?"

"Have you come back to me, Little Darling?" Despite Lilia's youthful appearance, whenever he smiled sweetly at his son, the crinkles at the corners of his eyes always betrayed him. No student had such deep lines nor such weary eyes. A thrum of worry for his father ran through Silver.

He was so old.

He deserved peace, retirement. And, instead, here he was running around among all these youthful people who constantly served to remind him of his own past. Of time slipping through his scarred hands like hourglass sand.

"Ah. Have I lost you again to your own thoughts? You know, you always get this little wrinkle between your brows whenever you think too hard, Silver." As if to emphasize his point, Lilia pressed his index finger into said furrow of his son's brow, smiling as he watched his boy trying his best not to pout.

"My apologies, Father. I was merely…lost in thought about something." Silver shifted to rise. Lilia, though he leaned away to allow his taller son to do so, did so with the ghost of a pout on his face. Could an old man not reminisce about the era in which his dear son depended on him?

Once Silver was seated next to him properly, the old general took a moment to look his son over. My, he'd become quite tall, hadn't he? And so capable! Still unwilling to concede a single inch to Sebek during their training sessions. Though his sweet child looked like and possessed the sweetest soul, there was an air of stubbornness about him as well. Lilia chuckled.

Knowing Silver got that from him.

"I'm sorry for causing you so much trouble, Father. I swear I'll-"

"Trouble?" Silver looked towards his father figure. Who looked back at him, an utterly baffled expression on his face. Hm? Had he said something wrong? Upon seeing a similar sort of confusion on his son's face, Lilia sighed and ran a hand through his hair. Silver tried not to look at the thinning black and pink strands.

"Oh, my Little Darling…" The young man's lips twitched at the familiar term of endearment, "It's too late for sentiments like that."

Silver's heart dropped.

His life, his short, pitiful, weak little life, flashed before his eyes. The feeling of his father's hair, inhumanly silken, in his hands. That deep, gentle voice humming sweetly off tune. Sabek curled up in his crib, a fierce expression shining on his face even then. Malleus, tall, dark, and flawlessly strong enough to protect any and everything he wished.

And him.

Stumbling after them pathetically.

"Your so-called trouble is nothing to me now, Silver. You could burp frogs all day or turn into a swan in this very moment, and you'd still be the son I love dearly." The calloused side of Lilia's hand came down in a soft chop atop the crown of Silver's head. Warm affection welling up within the young man's chest, spilling into his eyes.

What was a name?

It was just that, something to call. One needs no name if he was loved. So why should Silver care for a thing like that when those he loved most did not need to call him by his name? Friend. Brother.

Son.

SMILE
A day
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Merch Artists

S.No.	Artist and their Socials
1	Cube (@weeklylilia/@payasapan)
2	Lis (@hex82141a)
3	Rainbow (@rainbow-cheshire)
4	HungryWhales (HungryWhales.art on instagram)
5	Kestrius (@kestrius)

You are now at the end of the Valley of Dreams! We're waiting for Lilia to come back with more maps – see you soon!